A Survey of Criticism of Dylan Thomas's Poetry

From 1934 to 1954

and a bibliography from 1934 to 1966

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The thesis presents a survey of criticism of Dylan Thomas's poetry from the publication of *18 Poems* in 1934 to 1954, a year after the poet's death. Contemporary reaction to the poetry is presented and assessed, and some aspects of the criticism considered with regard to the poetry. The material is mainly presented chronologically: the reviews are chronologically grouped according to the volume reviewed, but within the group are dealt with according to some major aspect of the content, to give a degree of thematic continuity. Articles written between volumes appear chronologically, and some of the poet's earlier letters are used to show his own view of his work.

The survey includes the development of various points raised by the reviewers: the consideration of *18 Poems* includes some investigation into the monotony of the vocabulary to substantiate the complaints on this score; a similar investigation is made to substantiate the claims that *18 Poems* and *25 Poems* contain many rhythmic monotonies; some reasons for Thomas's obscurity are considered, and after the presentation of the reviews of *Deaths and Entrances*, "Poem in October" is analysed in order to demonstrate the technical virtuosity acclaimed by many critics, but denied vigorously by some, and is seen to be a poem of very fine technical quality, even if its theme is not of major importance.

The best criticism is seen to be that which recognizes the essentially non-philosophical nature of the poetry and a method of composition which depends greatly upon the creation of significant occasion in which the poet can explore and celebrate his response to
that situation. Close textual analysis benefits the reader by scrutinising the detail of the creation and by allowing him to share and develop the poet's responses. It becomes clear that Thomas was not served well by extremes of response which merely tended to polarize attitudes in unproductive and unsubstantiated exaggerations, and that even moderate criticism does not convince, any more than the poetry does, that Thomas is a great poet: there are seen to be too many qualifications, particularly concerning a basic poverty of theme.

In addition to the main survey in which are summarised the reviews, the reviews of 16 Poems and 25 Poems which are discussed in the text are reproduced in an appendix. The bibliographies which follow are concerned with a) periodicals and newspapers, and b) books. In the bibliography of reviews and articles, there are references which were available from mainly Edinburgh sources, arranged in alphabetical order of periodical title. The bibliography of books includes books mentioned in the text of the thesis and books directly on or relating to Thomas's life and poetry up to the present day. The thesis is concluded with an index to the writers whose criticism is mentioned in the text: reference is given both to the page of the text and to the number of the entry in the bibliography of periodicals.

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The thesis has been entirely composed by myself and constitutes the results of my own research.

Colin C. Lamont
INTRODUCTION

The main aim of this thesis is to give a critical account of some of the criticism of the poetry of Dylan Thomas, rather than just to make available references to the reviews and articles concerned. Because of Thomas's unusual measure of popularity, it is intended that this survey will go some way towards showing both the nature of this popularity and the effect it has had on the poetry and the poet's reputation. The structure of the survey enables the reader to follow the progress of Thomas's reputation throughout his writing life, or to concentrate on the attention given to the particular volumes of poetry. Although some of the criticism described is of doubtful value, much of it makes useful if brief comment; it also enables one to follow the development of critical attitudes. Most of the early poetry was written before he had an audience, but later poetry was influenced by his reception, even if initially only in terms of what poetry he selected from his notebooks for publication. It is also true that all who were interested in contemporary poetry in Thomas's lifetime were affected by the poetry and by what was written about it. In the development of arguments over Thomas's merits and deficiencies, and especially in the extreme positions adopted by various critics can be seen a failure to establish critical standards to guide audience and poet; much of the writing shows that during Thomas's lifetime there was much confusion over what standards should be applied to current poetry. This has allowed Thomas's reputation either to be inflated beyond its real worth, or to be viciously and unnecessarily deflated in response.
A considerable amount of critical work has been carried out in the U.S.A., and it may seem that Thomas has been neglected in Britain; but this is not so. The interest shown by Americans is so great that it overshadows the comparatively small interest shown here: this may be thought merely to show that the British attitude is in proportion to the poet's real worth and the American is out of proportion. Thomas is not considered a poetic force of sufficient power to be a significant part of a University course, even though much of his best work has frequently been anthologised, but it is important to see that there has been a definite response in Britain to his poetry which is probably obscured by the American enthusiasm. Because it is neither possible nor desirable to ignore the American response completely, I have considered American criticism which is available in this country; the literary scene in Britain inevitably involves American publications and so it is not possible to separate entirely the British from the American acceptance of the poet. Material which would have had to come from American sources has been ignored, other than in the bibliography, to some extent also because the cost of obtaining copies of articles would have been prohibitive.

The survey is also limited to Thomas's lifetime and the period immediately after his death: it is thus concerned with the contemporary response to the poet when the critical lines were being set. Later criticism would have been too extensive to cover in the same way, and the published books of criticism are readily available, and moreover might be seen as the product of the critical scene being studied. To close the survey approximately a year after Thomas's death allows for the immediate flurry of critical activity on his
death to be considered - still very much a contemporary response - and the time coincides with the publication of Elder Olson's critical book, which could be taken as the beginning of a new phase of criticism.

The material is presented in a way which is a compromise between two extremes: it would have been possible to have presented it entirely chronologically, or to have examined the topics considered by the reviewers thematically. Both methods have disadvantages, and so the criticism is arranged around each published volume of poetry according to the main concerns of the writer, but each volume and the periods between publications are dealt with chronologically. It is thus possible to gain an idea of the development of Thomas's reputation and to appreciate the value of what is said about the poetry. Some of the main concerns of the critics, and most crucial aspects of the poetry are discussed. Such discussion in no way forms a comprehensive critique of the poetry, but merely develops some parts of the critics' discussion in order to examine the usefulness of their comments. In referring to the poems, the text of Collected Poems is used, since the differences involved in some poems between earlier versions and the later are too slight to be significant. The reader is referred to J. A. Rolph, Dylan Thomas: A Bibliography (London 1956) for details of changes given in the textual history of each poem.

The bibliography is arranged alphabetically by titles of periodicals, and is intended to be principally useful for anyone reading this work. The thesis was begun in 1966, and the bibliography was almost completed before the publication of R. N. Maud's Dylan Thomas in Print (Pittsburgh 1970). The bibliography appended to the
thesis was undertaken when there was no extensive bibliography of Thomas's critical reception, and was compiled independently from Maud, with the intention of being ancillary to the main aim of the thesis rather than to be a fully comprehensive but uncritical bibliography.

Apart from the mechanics of the thesis, it is essential to define the usage of the most persistent and most contentious term. No word causes more difficulty than meaning and few other critical concerns are more provocative than the question of how much 'meaning' a poem should have. The underlying assumption in dealing with the criticism is that a poem is a communicated statement of the poet's vision of some aspects of human experience, a statement of which the 'meaning' is not necessarily paraphraseable or even explicable in a prose analysis, but which is understood by the reader by becoming part of his conscious experience. It is less important whether this assumption is particularly accurate, than that it affords a consistent basis upon which to build one's response to a poet's work and one's attitude to the critical commentary. Meaning is used throughout to refer to that awareness of the significance of the experience in a poem which must take place if a poem is to communicate to the reader; it is an awareness which may not be verbalised by the reader and which will differ amongst readers (because each brings his own unique experience to the act of reading), but an awareness which is as precisely fixed for each as the words which go towards making the poem contain the poet's awareness of the experience which stimulated the poem.
CHAPTER ONE

EIGHTEEN POEMS

This opening chapter briefly considers the alignment of Thomas in the verse of his time and notes that the unexpected elements of his work were likely to draw the critics' attention not just to the poetry, but distractingly towards details of it. The obscurity of the poetry is introduced together with the source and nature of Thomas's linguistic versatility, while the monotonous nature of the verse noted in several reviews is examined. Before looking at the reviews of Eighteen Poems, it is best to remember various aspects of reviewing and criticism which might affect the way in which the contemporary criticism of a poet is used, to bear in mind the inevitable limitations of the reviews of the first volume of a little known poet. Demands should not be made of the reviewer which it was never his intention to fulfil and so consideration is needed for the circumstances of his writing. A vital factor is whether the poetry under review is of a type the reviewer expects. Although we cannot predict whether a reviewer will like a work, it is possible to understand his comments in terms of how much the new poetry corresponds to contemporary modes of expression and to the known traditions of poetry. The reviewer can also only review a first work in the context of the poetry of others; it is only subsequently that he can treat the poet's development.

Thomas's thought and manner in Eighteen Poems are evidently outwith the main streams of English poetry and also clearly different
from much of the poetry of his time. The social and political align-
ment of such as Auden, Spender and Day Lewis, the austerity of Eliot's
spirituality, and the distilled concentration of the Imagists would
give no introduction to Thomas. The reviewer may thus react to the
usual features of the poetry rather than its true merits by praising
or condemning its 'originality'. Decrying that which is new and
strange is not unknown in poetical criticism and would be understandable
in the reaction to a poet who was undoubtedly strange, noisy, brash,
introspective to the point of obsession and very obscure in places.
The effect of obscurity will also be to force the reviewer who is
pressed for time to avoid saying what the poetry is about and to
emphasise the more striking features of its manner. Thus the common
features of the reviews include description of the novelties of the
poetry, commentary on the technical proficiency, avoidance of dis-
cussion of meaning, and a feeling that Thomas was a poet with promise.

The reviewer's main task is to introduce a newly published work,
assuming that the reader has not read the poems and indicating whether
the book is worth buying. He will therefore try to integrate the
new work into a familiar background, describing it in terms familiar
to the reader and referring to literary parallels which the reader
will recognize. He is guiding the public into the unknown and will
be at some loss if it is strange and forbidding territory in which the
poet has left few familiar landmarks. Inevitably such reviews
generalise and classify new poetry as being like or unlike the work of
a well-known poet; but they also make prominent the most bizarre
elements of the imagery, which is necessary but diverts from the main
concern over what the poet conveys and its value. Comment on all
matters is very selective and when a poet presents such an idiosyncratic style as Thomas, the eccentricities are often selected for general observation, detailed analysis being inappropriate when the reader has no text.

Because Thomas's poetry was different in several striking ways, critics seem to have been surprised by it into a state of some confusion, and it can be seen how the critical problems emerge which later become the elements of controversy. Such judgements as are made are somewhat remote from an assessment of merit compared to major figures and styles and even further removed from minor contemporary figures. Although the work of young, unknown poets forms the literary scene as well, it is more involved in influencing the poet than the critical reaction; it is inevitably the established criteria which the reviewers use and these are very much a product of the past rather than of the present. The surprise at a new poetic phenomenon could be said to be positive when the poetry offers something different of value, but negative when it merely offers what is different through deficiency. The reception of *Eighteen Poems* undoubtedly shows positive surprise. The reviews register the 'newness' of Thomas's style and the unusual nature of his themes. It is therefore necessary to outline briefly the main ways in which Thomas's thought and method differed from what the reviewers might expect. In three important areas of poetic practice can be found the origins of much of the critical argument which has been aroused by Thomas's poetry over the years: the experiences which he communicates, his relationship with his poetry and his audience and his techniques of presentation were in 1934 markedly dissimilar to those of other poets.
A poet's purpose is embodied in the themes of his poetry and these are conveyed by the words arranged according to the poet's experience and poetic practice. It is often necessary for the critic to separate his discussion of what a poem is about from his analysis of the manner in which it is conveyed, and this is quite proper; but the reviews of Eighteen Poems initiate a form of criticism too commonly found, the emphasis of manner at the expense of discussion of the nature and value of the experiences communicated. The straightforward reason is that Thomas's style obtrudes so much that it is easy to point to it and less than easy to comprehend it as a form of communication; the critics pick out the startling features and write their reviews round them. Thomas's manner is closely related to his preoccupations in his first volume but a reviewer would have found it hard to relate these to what was current at the time or in the recent past. He would not have found the Imagists' linguistic precision and search for accuracy in expressing the concreteness of their subjects, but instead a rhetorical effusiveness which obscures rather than defines. Thomas's apparent lack of linguistic discipline is not just a matter of surface texture, of superficial technique, but is basic to his poetic purpose as far as that can be determined. Instead of the image being used to define the 'thing' itself with a strict economy, a series of images are used in a tautological process in which images parallel images in restatements of the central metaphor of the poem. It would not suit Thomas's expression of the interdependence and interpenetration of all aspects of nature to use an imagistic method in which one 'thing' is pinned down and defined; rather he has to create interdependent and interpenetrating images
of limited aspects of the world, in order to express the notion that all the processes of the world and man are inseparable.

Thomas's poetry was from the beginning intensely introspective. It will be seen that even when he acquired a concern for others, the poetry was the expression of his own position in that concern and still selfish despite its superficial sympathy outside the self. Such a poetic attitude with its clearly romantic bias was certainly not new but in 1934 was assuredly unfashionable, as was the exotic richness of the style. Eliot had established a very different style and a very different form of interest in himself. The disciplined austerity of his imagery with all its difficult concentration and allusiveness expressed a transition from philosophical despair to religious faith involving the negation of personality necessary for rebirth. His arid style paralleled his suppression of the self by deliberately excluding the poet's personality so that in both theme and style, he contrasts markedly with Thomas's abandoned lushness of imagery, his unphilosophical celebration of the body and his fascinating or tedious solipsism. The comparison is made explicit in the poets' own words:

[The mind of the poet] may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.¹

and,

My poetry is, or should be, useful to me for one reason: it is the record of my individual struggle from darkness towards some measure of light. . . . My poetry is, or should be, useful to others for its individual recording of that same struggle with which they are necessarily acquainted . . .

Whatever is hidden should be made naked. To be stripped of darkness is to be clean, to strip of darkness is to make clean. Poetry, recording the stripping of the individual darkness, must, inevitably, cast light upon what has been hidden for too long, and, by so doing, make clean the naked exposure. Freud cast light on a little of the darkness he had exposed. Benefiting by the sight of the light and the knowledge of the hidden nakedness, poetry must drag further into the clean nakedness of light more even of the hidden causes than Freud could realise.\(^2\)

Thomas's deep personal involvement in his poetry and his assumption that such involvement is interesting and useful to the reader is very different from Eliot's separation of the suffering man from the creating mind. Although it may be argued that Eliot developed a poetry recording his individual struggle towards light, his writing has a universality and relevance beyond the self which is not found in *Eighteen Poems*, nor advocated in *New Verse* by Thomas. The presumption of Thomas's self-centredness expressed in terms of making naked the hidden causes of his existence is inimical to Eliot's method and declared purpose.

The reviewer's familiarity with Yeats would show the involved self-analysis of *Eighteen Poems* to be out of step with another established poet, and his contention that the poet had no justification in expressing himself. He related himself to his poetry not in terms of the direct personal utterance of Thomas, but through many people, a phantasmagoria of poetic voices transmuted through his own consciousness even though the motivating experience was his own. There is no such relationship between Thomas and his poetry, and it can be seen that there was no intention to form it, for the poetry is essentially exclusive, despite its notions of cosmic grandeur; it is always

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Thomas alone who is equated with the universal forces of life and destruction. Consequently there is a lack of width of vision and of experience in *Eighteen Poems*, compared with Yeats's poetry, but that is not necessarily to say that Thomas's vision and experience is not valid or interesting, merely that in yet another way it is different from the work of major contemporaries who helped to set the literary standards of the time.

The relationship of poet to audience is a crucial factor in his poetry and in a poetry variously and persistently claimed to be obscure, it comes to form a critical crux which may never satisfactorily be overcome. But it is not just a matter of whether the poet writes to be understood, for it involves his relationship with his fellow men and with his environment. What the poet wants to do with his poetry depends on what he believes in, on what he thinks and feels, for it is in his experience of man past and present, that his desire to communicate is born. The poetic utterance is, or should be the expression of the poet's vision of a chosen area of human life: the width, depth and quality of the vision will vary enormously as will the perspective chosen. It is in the variableness of the vision that the strength of poetry lies, but more importantly, it is the particular vision, the kind of experience lived through and the precise angle of perspective chosen by various poets which define the poet's relationship to his audience. Where Pound's early desire was to define precisely the quality of the subject of his poetic scrutiny, this was not a matter of technique alone. Rather the technique is the result of his desire to express his experience of the 'thing' as precisely and definitively as he can, the result being the technique of writing.
His relationship to his audience is as precise as his method and is a function of that method; he is the expositor, the scientific mind enlivened by a poetic sensibility and talent, and motivated by a wish to express clearly and unequivocally the nature of his subject to the reader.

Eliot's aridity and negation of personality are founded in the experience he has lived through and are expressed in his manner of writing. His verse in 'Four Quartets' sounds as if it has been refined and purged of all excess because his spiritual experience is of the same order. The "flames of incandescent terror" have not only burnt out the sensual life, but have also burnt out all rhetorical ornamentation; the effect is of deliberately contrived but quietly expressed poetry. The still quiet voice at the centre of the poetry is memorable but is distanced by the remoteness of the experience and the objectivity of the expression. Although 'Four Quartets' was not yet published in 1934, Eliot's art was already of such a nature as is most evident in the later work, but his influence could hardly be found in Thomas's first work where there is no still, quiet voice nor refining fire to purge thought and image of all excess.

It is plain that the impact of Thomas's poetry could not be the recognition of a promising talent founded in the precepts and practices of his contemporary masters, and it can as readily be seen that his work was not similar to most of his younger contemporaries. In the most basic of features, his poetry must have struck the critics as very different from what could be expected. The purposeful pursuit of a poetry of strong social impulse with an overt commitment to some political principle may not have been universal, but was featured
significantly in the work of Auden, Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, and less significantly of MacNeice. It is now a commonplace that the resultant poetry was uncomfortably propagandist, regrettablly tub-thumping, prone to the clique and coterie and less committed in practice than in intent, but when Thomas published his *Eighteen Poems* he would have found an audience more attuned to such poetry than to his highly charged brand of adolescent sexuality. Thomas's poetry was clearly dissimilar to the political and social verse of the time, and nothing more can be said than that, but a more striking contrast exists in the awareness of the past and for what Spender called the "palpable love of man for man" as opposed to Thomas's exclusive concern with himself. The premise made by Day Lewis was that the Great War had severed the connection with the past and that it was the poet's task to re-connect modern man with his 'ancestors'. It was not their way to sit on the banks of a canal fishing, waiting for a miraculous escape from the ruins of Western civilisation; their role was to regenerate and rebuild on a foundation of love in a society made good by revolution:

The Great War tore our youth from its roots. I see in this poem (Spender's "I think continually of those who were truly great") a successful attempt to re-establish communication with the past, a minor miracle of healing. And it takes the form of ancestor worship.3

The poet's need to establish communication with the past is seen to be parallel with the need to communicate with his fellow-men, to establish love as the basis of his social and poetical thought.

Such an expression of concern for others was doubtless naive, but the

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3 *C. Day Lewis, A Hope for Poetry, 1934.*
consequent intention to communicate distinguishes the poetry from Thomas's.

Day Lewis's insistence that poetry was the communication of a social consciousness is at odds with Thomas's practice. Although Thomas wrote that his poetry should be useful to others through recognition of a personal struggle and that he took his "stand with any revolutionary body that asserts it to be the right of all men to share, equally and impartially; every production of men from man and from the sources of production at man's disposal", his unpolitical poetry revealed in its early form little regard for anything that could not be circumscribed by the poet's own body and consciousness of himself. The first critical reaction notes the intense introspection and inevitably finds its startling in comparison with the 'New Country' poetry. The basis of the difference is in the mode of address. Auden, for example, at this period was likely to be explicitly addressing an audience:

Comrades to whom our thoughts return,
Brothers for whom our bowels yearn
When words are over;
Remember that in each direction
Love outside our own election
Holds us in unseen connection;
O trust that ever,

whereas Thomas was more likely to be making statements which are really addressed to no-one. Auden's technique is unsatisfactory because it generates a false bonhomie, but a reviewer might react more to the difference between two styles than to the deficiencies of one or the other.

Thomas was involved in self-exposure in Eighteen Poems, the "stripping of the individual darkness" as he put it for publication,
or as he wrote more vividly:

To hell with everything except the inner necessity for expression and the medium of expression, everything except the great need of forever striving after this mystery and meaning I mean about. There is only one object; the removing of veils from your soul and scabs from your body. Reaching a self-freedom is the only object.  

Self-freedom may be an admirable goal, but will not necessarily interest anyone else; the "inner necessity" to express the exposure of the scabby nature of one's soul does not necessarily amount to an adequate or even intelligible poetic communication. Thomas's statements tell something of his motivation but hardly encourage belief in a desire to communicate coherently, and they contrast with Day Lewis's declared intention to seek out and speak to his audience. More importantly, the attitude implicit in a remark like "To hell with everything except the inner necessity for expression" is strikingly dissimilar to the attitudes of Pound, Eliot and Yeats, all of whom, in their various ways, answer to demands other than the inner necessity to express themselves. They notably seek the removal of the poet's self-centredness and an externalisation of his utterance: their poetry seems to answer to something outwith themselves. The suggestion of selfishness in Thomas's attitude of answering to nothing other than his inner necessity to lay bare his soul may be quite acceptable in poetry, but contradicts his belief in its usefulness to others, which makes such a strong contrast with other poetry of the time. It can be argued that to make public a poetic statement is to accept a public responsibility to offer something of value by involving the

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4 S.L., p.13 (dated May 9, 1933).
audience in the experience expressed. Even though Thomas does sometimes succeed in involving his reader in a shared experience, such a feature of his poetry is less evident than in the poetry with which the reviewers would have been familiar.

It is unsurprising that the initial reaction to Thomas involves some disapproval of the privacy of his method and thought; it is not the privacy of erudite or personal allusion, but that of an introverted vision expressed in what seemed often to be a wilfully diffuse and self-indulgent rhetoric. The introversion is understandable in adolescent poetry (which is not inevitably interesting to anyone else) but the necessity for the manner is less understandable. It is in technique, manner and in the texture of his poetry that the most notable surprises are found, so that it is to his imagery and style that the first reviewers turn, establishing from the beginning the basic critical problem of the relationship between meaning and expression. Thomas's style was undoubtedly unusual for its time, and the critical reaction is affected by its unusualness, but he was not without company. Of the poets writing in 1934, George Barker has the closest affinity with Thomas. The following lines might well have been written by Thomas:

I am that face about which the fire fell.  
Nor can the years, though clouds, wholly hide  
The solar glow enthroning the brown on a crowd.  
These eyeballs, curving swiftly over space  
Fell from that space across which curve the start  
Through spreading rings . . .5

The imagery is less dense than Thomas's, but its concentration and its

appeal to a cosmic sense are very similar to Thomas's practice.

Barker's belief was that a poem was purely verbal in origin and spontaneous in impulse (from his answers to the New Verse enquiry), which precludes the idea of pre-verbal thought, of an inner necessity providing the impulse to verbalise. This is different from Thomas's view, but there is in the end a correspondence in style deriving from their response to verbal stimulus. Yet Barker was more likely to produce an overtly political or moral statement than Thomas:

When will men again
Lift irresistible fists
Not bend from ends
But each man lift man
Nearer again.\(^6\)

The difference between that kind of writing and Thomas's is central to his impact on the poetry-reading public and is central also to the criticism evoked. Thomas offered a very different way of writing from the norm of the moment, so that a critic was able to speak of two kinds of writing of the time:

George Barker is of particular interest here, because, possessing less self-assurance than Thomas, he hovered so uneasily between the two kinds of writing in the thirties, to the detriment, it must be said of much of his verse.\(^7\)

The result of Thomas's being a patently of one 'kind of writing' was that reviewers are drawn towards treating of the 'kind' of writing at the expense of discussing what it is or says as a unified expression.

The first published criticism of Thomas's writing is exclusively

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6 George Barker, p.22.

concerned with style. Edith Sitwell, who later to champion Thomas as one of the greatest writers of our time, roundly condemned his style in her book on modern poetry:

Mr. Grigson . . . has, I imagine, "enthroned" the writer whose verse I shall quote, because he is the herald of the new poetry of which I understand, we are so much in need. This masterpiece - it is entitled, simply and modestly, 'Poem' - is in four parts, and here are the last two:

III

What is the world? Of my two sleepings, who
Shall awake when cures and their itch
Raise up this red-eyed earth?
Pack off the shapes of daylight and their starch,
The sunny gentleman, the washing rich,
Or drive the night-geared forth. . . [Parts III and IV follow]

An appalling affair! Metaphysics have not helped here. The idea is really of no importance, and the thick squelching, cloying, muddy substance of the "which", "itch", "shapes", "starch", "washing" rich verse, and the equally, or almost equally hideous "kicks", "sack", "trash", "quick", "cock", "back", "smack" affair - these defeat criticism. In muddiness and incapacity they leave T. E. Brown's "God, wot, plot" arrangement at the starting post. 8

Nothing is said about any idea behind the poem, but it is obvious that the poem expresses a concept of the poet's world. The sound effects may arguably not contribute to that expression, but there can be no comparison with the vacuity of T. E. Brown's lines:

A garden is a lovesome thing, God wot!
Rose plot
Fringed pool,
Fern'd grot - . . .

Miss Sitwell has not looked beneath the surface of the poem because her understanding has been occluded by the opacity of the language, yet she does not establish the ways in which the sounds offend and

8 Edith Sitwell, Aspects of Modern Poetry, p.149.
occlude. A worse feature of this criticism is the suspicion that its impulse originates in a personal antagonism not with the poet, but Grigson, that she is motivated by a desire to depose those whom Grigson has 'enthroned'.

Thomas's own reaction to the treatment of 'Our eunuch dreams' is no credit to him, for it is offensively abusive:

So you've been reviewing Edith Sitwell's latest piece of virgin dung, have you? Isn't she a poisonous thing of a woman, lying, concealing, flipping, plagiarising, misquoting, and being as clever a crooked literary publicist as ever. I do hope you pointed out in your review the real points against the book (you did, I know, but I like being dogmatic)? The majority of the book was cribbed from Herbert Read and Leavis, actually and criminally cribbed. She has misquoted Hopkins at least twenty times, reprinted many poems without the permission of publisher or poet. Yes, that was my poem, absurdly criticised. I duly sent my protest to Gerald Duckworth and he replied to the effect that so many protests of a similar sort had been received, that he could, as yet, do nothing about it.9

It is of biographical rather than critical interest that the earliest exchange was so antagonistic; it is of greater critical interest that Fitzgibbon, Thomas's official biographer should have seen Sitwell as a major influence in establishing Thomas's reputation. If true, it is remarkable that her later praise, which is no clearer than her present condemnation, should have had such an influence. Her critical writing always seems founded more on the dramatic than the explanatory or evaluative: she dismisses Thomas here with the same panache as she later embraces him. The extract from her book demonstrates two trends which are seen throughout Thomas's career: the surface complexity and denseness of the verse encourages the critic

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9 S.L., p.150.
either to admire its richness or to refute its value, dazzled into admiration or put off by bewilderment; and the question of the poet's standing, his greatness or otherwise, has aroused extremes of reaction in which the possible merit of the poetry is lost.

Although the reviews of _Eighteen Poems_ are few, the response is often interesting and frequently confused. According to Fitzgibbon, the book was reviewed in the _Morning Post_, the _Times Literary Supplement_ and the Swansea papers, but he is inaccurate. Most reviewers see a poet of talent emerging, and although they appreciate different features, they point to the same faults. They mainly see what is different from the poetry to be expected and concentrate on the form and manner of expression of limited and repetitive themes. Rayner Heppenstall is most energetic in praise, though not alone in praising. Thomas was for him the most promising poet since Graves had last published, rejoicing to find a poetic voice. He was dissatisfied with the emasculated sound of contemporary poetry:

> This (as much as anything else) is the Age of Laryngitis... half the technical effort of poets today is to stifle that very rhythmic urge - the urge to stand up and sing - which is the primary motive force of all poetry.\(^{11}\)

Michael Roberts, in his introduction to the _Faber Book of Modern Verse_, had the same idea of the centrality of sound to the concept of a poem, but did not necessarily advocate incantation as Heppenstall does:

> Modern poets have been decreasingly concerned with sound-effects as independent entities, and today the auditory rhetoric of poetry is dictated, not by its own rules, but by the central impulse of the poem.\(^{12}\)

\(^{10}\) _Life_, p.183.

\(^{11}\) Rayner Heppenstall, _Adelphi_, IX, 314.

It is not clear from his review what relationship Heppenstall envisages between sound and meaning for he does not isolate the meaning, being content to acclaim the new 'voice'. In so doing, he fails to describe the essence of the poetry since it is the experience created not the externalities of modes of expression which is the essence.

Speaking of language, Heppenstall places Thomas in a line of poets with a Shakespearean ability to manipulate language as if it were meant to be heard - Milton, Keats, Hopkins and Graves (illustrious company for a young poet). He does not know why there should be a reluctance amongst poets to 'use their voices' but rightly mentions the Welsh tradition as one reason for Thomas's use of the sound element. He also sees the style as productive of the faults of clashing images, lack of sustained movements and a strained use of words, yet accepts them as an excess of what he likes. His criticism is incomplete: some indication of why these excesses are faults is missing; there is no distinction clarified between the use and the abuse of the same technique, no indication of the way the lushness of imagery works to obscure the central experience of the poem. When Heppenstall declares that much of Eighteen Poems comes from the stomach, he avoids the main demand on the reviewer to describe what the poems are. He refers to the preponderance of anatomical imagery, but does not explain to what end Thomas puts it in expressing his thought and emotion, leaving the matter as if the reader should apprehend the poetry in the bowels in a vague Lawrentian fashion. The review is favourable to the poet but avoids committing itself to an explanation of the essence of the poetry in his unrelated discussion of technique.
The striking quality of Thomas’s language and imagery is the common feature discussed in the reviews. Desmond Hawkins writes of Thomas as the first poet to "break through the fashionable limitation and speak an unborrowed language." He writes that Thomas has inherited a "magical sense of the macabre" from Eliot and a "textual firmness" from Auden, being most impressed by the "piston-like energy that jolts and shocks in short groups of hard, contrasted consonants," an energy which is more obvious when the poems are read aloud, he points out, in all their "fiery and intense eloquence." The textual firmness of these poems must be doubted, for the self-indulgence apparent in many causes a looseness of expression which is frequently on the verge of chaos. Although concerned at the verbal obsession with physiology, he acclaims the achievement of "fusing metaphysical poetry into sensuous terms" (as if Donne had not done so more successfully and with more wit), but does not question whether these sensuous terms are used literally or metaphorically. What the thought is, what the metaphysic might be is not said, but he introduces a volume of poetry which "is not merely a book of unusual promise; it is more probably the sort of bomb that bursts not more than once in three years."

The TLS reviewer was not impressed by textual firmness, for he writes of exclusiveness of vocabulary and idiom:

Mr. Thomas’s idiom is certainly his own, even if it is often too "private" to be easily intelligible. But those who can only credit poetry with originality if it is also something of a puzzle will find much in this volume to gratify their taste for the elusive and disconcerting . . .


14 TLS, March 14, 1935, p.163. Despite the 35 years interval, the TLS is not prepared to disclose the name of the reviewer, but confirms that the review of 2SP is by the same writer.
The capacity of Thomas's idiom to obscure is described as a puzzle, and either the solution will prove disconcerting or else the process of solving it will upset the reader. It is arguable that the solving of a puzzle is a legitimate pleasure (though it cannot be valued highly), but the notion that originality derives from elusiveness of meaning is rightly condemned. He relates the method to the content, noting Thomas's habit of translating human experience into the terms of physiology or the machine and the "powerful as well as surprising audacities" produced by "his vivid sense of the correspondence between the forces informing the macrocosm and the microcosm." It is still unclear what the significance of this might be.

Concern over imagery, vocabulary, sound patterns and so on, should be married to a concern to establish the nature and quality of the experience of the poetry, but if the experience is obscured by the expression of it, not only is there poor poetry, or no poetry at all, but also a problem for the reviewer over what to say. Out of this dilemma comes the review which deals in isolation with technique. The reviewer for the Morning Post, for example, is struck by the use of so many physiological terms and by a "virtuosity with words" which produces impenetrable obscurities:

A psychologist would observe Mr. Thomas's constant use of images and epithets which are secretory or glandular. Feather, hair, skin, marrow, gums, lips, milk, sucking, blood, veins, pitch - such words occur in every poem.15

The reviewer complains of a monotony resulting from the vocabulary and lack of intellectual control, but only broadly gestures towards

the content of the poems as being to do with "birth, death and life, and the human spirit." Yet the critics are able to find a meaningful core in the midst of the inventiveness and abundance of imagery:

The sensuous beauty of his poetry will strike the reader most at first, that quality being so rare in poetry at present; but if he returns to it he will find also the most curious thought. This union of qualities should be found in all poetry, which should give such pleasure that we return to it again and again, and have such meaning that every reading has a new reward. The poems in this volume give this double pleasure. It is one of the most remarkable books of poetry which has appeared for several years.16

If thought and beautiful expression are effectively united, it is strange that the poems are so difficult and the imagery so frequently ugly and evocative of an ugly vision. This is also a strange description of Thomas's poetry because his method of composition scarcely warrants it. His method of creating a series of images to reiterate a central idea of emotion rather than isolating and communicating progressive ideas through a continuous development of images gives a circular impression to the reader who wonders whether a poetic statement is going to be made. And as Michael Roberts says, Thomas is too conscious of the psychological nature of his writing, so that a poem is less a discovery than a too carefully arranged deduction and he consciously exploits the unity and impressiveness created by the "sequence of images which come into our minds when we are not engaged in conscious thought."17 In believing that Thomas makes explicit what should be latent, Roberts is probably aware of a limiting factor in the early poems. One effect of a

17 Michael Roberts, The Criterion, XIV (April 1935), 496.
series of repetitive dependent images is to deny the reader the opportunity to create his own images from the poet's expression, to think his way into the poetic statement and to contribute to it (in which lies the uniqueness of the activity of reading poetry). What should be latent, to be realised in the reader's response, is made explicit by the poet. Thomas cannot of course, provide an exhaustive series of images, so that there are latent possibilities, but he severely limits the reader's response by confining the reader's activity to the poet's circumscribing images instead of liberating him to pursue his own associations. The range of imaginative activity is limited and the poet risks fatiguing his reader's response to what is foreign to him. As Roberts says, many images are comprehensible but "not necessarily valid for the reader." He is indicating a serious fault in the poems which contributes greatly to their monotny, but he also shows its promise:

His interest in poetic technique, in words and in those subjective experiences which can only be expressed through images of tactile, kinaesthetic, and visceral sensation already produces good poems. The use of religious symbols in some of his poems seems to show that he realises that 'religious' poetry is psychological poetry which uses a symbolising more effective and profound than his own limited and self-conscious Freudian images.

Roberts's review has interesting comments on the psychic nature of the poetry, and is thus better than those in which insufficient notice is paid to what the poetry conveys because the linguistic extravagance usurps the critic's attention. Yet it was early realised that the poems are mainly significant as verbal extravaganzas, not for any thought they might convey:
Mr. Dylan Thomas is another sort of poet altogether. In exact contrast to Mr. Barker who is elaborate and oblique in intention though relatively simple in language, Mr. Thomas uses a complex and exotic vocabulary for the direct communication of simple, uncomplicated modes of feeling. So that where he is "difficult" it is a purely verbal difficulty — a matter of finding any precise interpretation for the favourite images, the high-keyed epithets which characterise his verse.  

He sees a danger that Thomas becomes too interested in sound effects and patterns to care sufficiently for other "equally important values," creating poetry that can be bombastic, but which can also have an invigorating "spirited vertebrateness" and a "technical assurance which may yet develop into a true authoritativeness of manner." His need is accurately shown to be for a "tougher, sparer use of language," to "make himself more of an ascetic in words, or the austerity which his poetry so much needs will be lost in a Swinburnian facility."

The review is dominated by treatment of the poet's style, but it is unsurprising since there is little substance in the experience communicated.

At worst *Eighteen Poems* baffled because of its verbal complexity. The despair of J. D. Williams, editor of the *Herald of Wales*, in trying to make sense of the volume, illustrates a not uncommon reaction. He passed the task of reviewing it to one of Thomas's contemporaries who wrote of a "strange, compressed, tortuous" poetry which "excites by its wild lapses into baffling obscurity." The uncritical acceptance of baffling obscurity as a source of excitement

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is perverse and underlies many absurd claims to the value of the poetry. It is poor criticism to see merit in wild lapses of any kind or in the capacity to "outstrip Auden in audacity and Eliot in obscurity." Vaughan-Thomas further astonishes by expressing his enjoyment of imagery which can "express a world of ideas in a few lines," for the significance of much of the imagery is so often limited and the ephemeral 'ideas' are dissipated not concentrated. Although he rightly notes a loss of 'vigour' because of a dependence on technique, his review is unconvincing in its final estimate:

Yet no one can read his work without feeling that here is a poet magnificently equipped to achieve great things. He has individuality, and a confident touch.

The local press produced another review in which strange claims are made. A. E. Trick, a friend of Thomas's, compared the language with that of poets who adopt machinery as a poetic subject, writing "rhapsodies to its beneficence and beauty" in an attempt to appease its mercilessness. He considers that Thomas understands and controls 'the machine':

Some few pretend to ignore its existence and still wallow with Wordsworth amongst the pale pansies and modest marigolds. Not so, Dylan Thomas, he has viewed the machine, assessed its strength and measured its significance. Like the operative at the switchboard controlling the city's power, he understands and controls it.20

The comment is remarkable, since the poems are patently not about machinery. Many poems are about the poet's body and its functions, and other than in incidental images, the machine is less understood.

and controlled than ignored. Trick's praise is as oddly orientated as Vaughan. Thomas's: comparing Thomas with James Joyce, he says that Thomas hacked out a new language from old words and phrases while Joyce produced an "illegitimate literary offspring", from many languages. Even though he explains that Thomas transmutes "his hacks with the alchemy of his essentially poetic imagination," to speak of hacking out a poem sounds an ugly description for a creative act.

The concentration of attention on technical aspects of Thomas's language can lead to the mistaken assumption that he has a major statement to make in the elemental themes of his verse; this is made more likely by the contrast with the poetry of the time. The Morning Post generalised on the fashions of the day:

There is no doubt an art-for-art's sake tendency... in the poems of Mr. T. S. Eliot and Mr. Ezra Pound. In reaction to this among the newer poets, there is a tendency... to make verse pragmatic, utilitarian, moralistic and political; to posit an "England of ours where no one is well," and then to write poems which will make everyone, if only they will read the poems, as well as possible.

Thomas is significant for being outside the "moralistic political caravan" for writing about what is really important, and for being "post-revolutionary, post-, pre-, or extra-political." The poems are comparatively important because,

They are concerned with what is more important than the next borough council or general election or the next revolution, with birth, death, and life and the human spirit.

The condescension towards 'political' poetry is itself unjustified and allows a false elevation of Thomas's themes. Auden, Spender and Day Lewis wrote some drearily unconvincing verse in the name of political concern, but these comments belittle the scale of their
awareness, and it is obvious that their politics are further removed from the parish pump than is credited here. It is as obvious that the relevance of Thomas's treatment of "birth, death and life and the human spirit" has to be examined; its appearance is not in itself significant, for what is needed is qualitative analysis.

A. E. Trick's comment upon the political alignment of these poets was more eccentric. He divided poets into creatures and creators of their age, finding that Auden and Spender (both creators) are devalued by their propagandist elements, whereas Thomas, also a creator, did not allow politics to intrude: his politics are rather known "instinctively" to be correct and to "hover like a faint perfume" above the lines of his poetry. It took a remarkable instinct to detect the smell of politics in Eighteen Poems, and to speak of the 'correctness' of anyone's politics is merely to say they agree with your own. Trick's comments are representative of the later, more detailed criticism in which the critic's prejudices and pet interests are read into poems, with a resultant exaggeration of their value. But most reviewers were too busy registering Thomas's individualistic manner and introspection to compare him with his contemporaries; they view him as a phenomenon whose poetry attracts by its vitality of language and the vigour of its imagery and whose content tends to be less important. Here can be seen the beginnings of exaggeration of the intrinsic value of the poetry's content which led to false claims for the poet's greatness.

It is less important in the short term that Thomas's relationship with other poets is not explored than that the reviewers' concentration upon the effects of style largely precluded adequate description of the experience communicated through the poems. It is true that
the experience to be communicated is often clouded by the violent
energy of the imagery, by the convoluted syntax and by the rhetorical
devices, and it may well be that the critics suppressed discussion of
meaning as a result. Where the actual content is considered, there
is general agreement that the central expression of the poems, arrived
at with some considerable difficulty, suffers from a monotonous in-
sistence on a few themes. The Listener finds that the poetry is
limited to "themes unpleasant or disgusting." Verse which is so
restricted to "blind processes" of the "workings of lust and dis-
solution" (Webster and Donne are connected with Thomas, here) is
said to demand philosophical detachment: when Thomas detaches himself
sufficiently, his images are seen as strange but beautiful, but when
he does not, he inextricably combines disgust with delight. Without
objectivity, it is concluded, the process is self-limiting and
horrifying:

Mr. Thomas's questioning of life is essentially
philosophical in the sense that it is a questioning
of life's beginning and end. But the form which it
takes, that is pre-natal and post-mortem imagery, is
by its nature inarticulate, and so his meditations on
these things sometimes deepens the horror which one
naturally feels for them without achieving the clear-
ness and objectivity of Webster's and Donne's.

The New Verse review partly succeeded in isolating the reasons
for thematic monotony, finding an impurity of image source in the
'lower nature' of the poet rather than a delight in disgust. But
these two ideas are closely related: the over stressed secretory
images and themes can be described as the result of an impurity of

21 The Listener, February 27, 1935, p.381.
image source, but in the end it is the impression of an unsavoury delight in such impurity which offends:

The "birth, copulation, death" thought of the poems persists through a similar vocabulary, and images repeated too often, and too often impure, i.e. instead of being imaginative or coming controlled from the momentary emotions, they are images of secretion, and glandular images (hair, feather, nail, milk, suck, worm, etc., etc.) which seem to emerge uncontrolled from the lower nature.

It is less that the poetry is thematically monotonous than that the language used to convey the themes is repetitious and narrow in range. Where the "birth, copulation, death" preoccupation has the potential for a rich and widely ranging exploration, Thomas limits that potential by the restriction imposed by his expression. At the same time, there is a laxity, an undiscriminating indulgence in verbal play; as is said in New Verse, "at times any word will do: caulk it in, if it's a nice word and damn the meaning." Criticism is inevitably drawn towards the language, and forced to be vague about the experience communicated:

The subtraction sum to find the merits of these poems and what they point towards is not difficult: take away what is bad and the good remnants are these: a rhetorical toughness, the now rare intellectual virtue of an attempt at form, occasional but not infrequent excellencies of imaginative statement and expression of realities beyond reality.

Although the reviews of Eighteen Poems are generally favourable, a number of important issues are raised. Because they say little or nothing about the possible meaning of the poems, and instead examine the mode of expression, it might appear that once the rich foliage is stripped away, there is little of value left. Even if no formal statement is made, a major critical issue is involved here. In a
well-wrought poem it is only possible to separate style from content as a critical convenience; ultimately criticism has to deal with the total expression of which method is just a function. Dylan Thomas often clothes a little substance in a heavy mantle of technicality and overblown imagery and thus forces a separation of form from content which may encourage the critic to admire the virtuosity of the poet and the richness of the imagery while ignoring the poverty of thought and experience expressed by it; alternatively the critic may deplore the egocentric sameness of the content of the poems while ignoring the capacity of brilliance of expression to enliven and make valuable an ordinary thought. The central argument cannot be resolved: the reader may accept that a poem 'says' little but that its expression gives it value, or he may deny this attitude and claim that a poem must make an important statement. The differences between Thomas's admirers and detractors included this essential argument, and much critical energy is dissipated in fruitless argument, to the exclusion of the more important matters of the integration of manner and content and the total effect achieved. It is vital to consider what the poems are about and the efficiency of the poet's method, for it is in a failure to utilise his technical skill to express what convinces the reader as a valuable experience that the poems are most noticeably at fault.

Criticism is more satisfactory where it can evaluate the quality of what a poem conveys before it scrutinises the manner of its communication; for a critic to apply his energy to describing technique alone can be misleading if it diverts the reader's attention away from the totality of the poems towards an exaggerated
opinion of the importance of flashy technique. A sound poetic method makes the reader respond to what the poem is about, rather than how it sounds or how the imagery works, even where a great deal of ornamentation is used; what stylistic features can do includes the enhancement of the situation explored, or the underlining of its ugliness; it is the emphasis and punctuation of the poetic utterance to increase its impact in a completely appropriate way. There can only be separation of content from style for analytical purposes; a good poem is the result of the creation of ideas and their expression in effective terms. A major reason for the insistence in these first reviews on stylistic matters is that Thomas very often allows the surface energy of his lines, his diction and his imagery to become divorced from their proper purpose. Whereas the reader should reach an understanding of a poem (albeit with difficulty) before asking himself how he reached it, often in Thomas's earlier poems he is forced to approach his understanding by a conscious consideration of the manner of his expression. Thomas fortunately succeeded in occasionally controlling his words and directing his tangled imagery towards a potent expression of his vision, which is one reason for the generally warm reception of *Eighteen Poems*. It was also an ability which was later to develop into the firmer control of his unruly language found in his major lyrics.

It is a useful simplification to say that a poem evolves from a poet's desire to communicate his insight into particular experiences, allied to his ability to manipulate language to make a striking and memorable statement. It is therefore legitimate to take heed of what he says about his intentions and methods. Thomas's answers to the *New Verse* enquiry include a declaration of his aim:
Poetry is the rhythmic, inevitably narrative, movement from an overclothed blindness to a naked vision that depends in its intensity on the strength of the labour put into the creation of the poetry. My poetry is, or should be, useful to me for one reason; it is the record of my individual struggle from darkness towards some measure of light, and what of the individual struggle is still to come benefits by the sight and knowledge of the faults and fewer merits in that concrete record. My poetry is; or should be, useful to others for its individual recording of that same struggle with which they are necessarily acquainted.22

This is further expanded:

Whatever is hidden should be made naked. To be stripped of darkness is to be clean, to strip of darkness is to make clean. Poetry, recording the stripping of the individual darkness, must, inevitably, cast light upon what has been hidden for too long, and, by so doing, make clean the naked exposure. Freud cast light on a little of the darkness he had exposed. Benefiting by the sight of the light and the knowledge of the hidden nakedness, poetry must drag further into the clean nakedness of light more even of the hidden causes than Freud could realise.

The validity of these statements regarding much later poetry is doubtful, but unless Thomas was deliberately misleading, they serve admirably as a record of his purpose in Eighteen Poems. The public declaration is supported in his private correspondence, as in a letter to Trevor Hughes, written in 1934:

It is my aim as an artist . . . to bring these wonders [the external wonders of the world] into myself, to prove beyond doubt to myself that the flesh that covers me is the flesh that covers the sun, that the blood in my lungs is the blood that goes up and down in a tree. It is the simplicity of religion.23

Thomas has more to say about style than about theme, but there is enough to show that he was consciously intent upon self-exploration

22 See above, footnote 2.
23 S.L., p.87.
and an attempt to place himself significantly in relationship with the world around him, seeking insight through himself - essentially a Romantic purpose. The most striking thought in the poems is towards equating the self, body and mind with all the features of the universe, towards the expression of the absolute unity of all things in one great turmoil of creation and destruction, birth in death and death in birth; he wrote of the integration of all life in one vast cosmic process. It is not philosophical poetry, for there is no attempt to rationalise a coherent expression of the causes and principles behind the 'process', but rather exploratory and descriptive poetry: if it has a philosophy in it, it must be formalised by the reader. The poems are evidently narrow in scope and their value as an insight into the human condition is very limited. They depend for success on the forcefulness of the processes described, the latent and rather primitive energy involved in the tense conflicts of existence and on the structure and style of the poetic presentation. What we find are poems whose central meaning is simple but at times obscured by the extravagant style, poems which can often be summarised simply, as in the TLS: "Mr. Thomas's habit of translating human experience into the terms of physiology or of the machine, and his vivid sense of the correspondence between the forces informing the macrocosm and the microcosm." In order to create a sense of energy, of the explosive potential and friction of life together with the sense of unity of the universal forces operating on man and all life forms, Thomas has pervaded the expression of his poems with energy derived from verbal conflict and friction and has attempted to conceptualise his awareness of the ultimate force embracing all other forces by circumscribing a 'host' of images in a single statement which recurs
throughout. To express the full force of the fusion of two apparently disparate elements, creation and destruction, to convey the full horror of the situation, Thomas seeks to thrust disparate images together, to contain the image of death in the very essence of birth.

The themes of *Eighteen Poems* are certainly repetitious, but the real question is whether it matters. If the subject matter is important enough, it will bear repetition, and if the subjects are presented in a varied and entertaining way, there will be satisfaction at this rather than boredom. Consideration of the limitations of the poems shows that the poems are generally dependent on the vigour of presentation to overcome the sameness of the topics and that where the stylistic techniques are overdone the lasting effect is of inadequate subject matter presented in an artificial and unrelieved uniformity of style. Yet, there is also something compelling about the poems which is registered by the reviewers and which has been much commented upon since: it derives less from the unexpectedness and novelty which struck the first readers than from the grotesque vision of his world.

The grotesqueness and the macabre nature of his poetry underlies most of the poems and it is essential to examine what they convey. The inevitability of the progress towards death is a dominant theme. Thomas traces the awareness of death even in the infant and embryo and so involves the conflict between images of death and life at its starkest. Constant factors expressed include time's progress, the horrible physical aspects of death, and, because life itself holds its own destruction, the destructive power of the sexual act. The child in "When once the twilight locks no longer", sets out to explore its new environment after its birth, and, falling into a sleep, dreams of death in a gruesome vision:
But when the stars, assuming shape,
Drew in his eyes the straws of sleep,
He drowned his father's magics in a dream.

All issue armoured, of the grave,
The redhaired cancer still alive,
The cataracted eyes that filmed their cloth;
Some dead undid their bushy jaws,
And bags of blood let out their flies;
He had by heart the Christ-cross-row of death.

By 'drowning his father's magics', the dream negates the life given to
the child by its father, makes the child conscious of death (thereby
destroying the magic of new life), and transcends the normal pro-
cesses of time. The vision is later dispelled and the child is told
to waken to the urgent demands of life, with all its exciting
possibilities:

Awake my sleper, to the sun
A worker in the morning town,
And leave the poppied pickthank where he lies;
The fences of the light are down,
All but the brisket riders thrown,
And worlds hang on the trees.

The final brisk optimism does not have the strength to sound plausible
after the horrors of the nightmare vision, and the final effect is
morbid.

In "Before I knocked," the unborn child, aware of the future,
becomes a Christ figure, a mortal Christ who becomes confused in
identity with the poet himself:

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.

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.
Just as all the forces of the universe are conjoined, so Christ is merged into all men, but Thomas does not use the Christian belief to give positivity to his poem: the forsaken Christ at His death is used as an image of failure, of emptiness. In both poems a situation is presented and explored, statements are made, but little or no progress is made towards a positive faith in anything. In contrast, "From love's first fever to her plague," by following the growth of awareness in the newly born child as he moves towards manhood is more purposeful. The child is again mysteriously aware of death, but is also becoming more aware of the positive forces in his life.

The body prospered, teeth in the marrowed gums,
The growing bones, the rumour of manseed
Within the hallowed sand, blood blessed the heart,
And the four winds that had long blown as one,
Shone in my ears the light of sound,
Called in my eyes the sound of light.

He also learns of the multiplicity of life, learns how to express himself and learns from the "million minds" the experience of his youth.

Such warmth and positiveness is less evident in "Light breaks where no sun shines", where the child learns about the processes of the world, its cyclic nature and his own position as an inseparable part of this order. His sexuality is asserted and given cosmic significance; it is also linked with the conception of the child himself, in an effort to image the cycle of life and death. More explicitly, "I dreamed my genesis" speaks of the act of conception and links it irrevocably with death. Here we find that the inseparability of conception and death is seen in a dream, a dream in which Thomas visualises his own conception and the conception of death in the Great War which had begun in the same year:
I dreamed my genesis and died again, shrapnel
Rammed in the marching heart, hole
In the stitched wound and clotted wind, muzzled
Death on the mouth that ate the gas.

Conceived together and historically united, poet and war symbolise both life and death, and as the poet 'dies again' in his vision of battle, he connects the creation and the destruction of life in a restatement of the familiar theme.

"My World is Pyramid" develops the same idea: the death of any man becomes Thomas's death just as his life becomes the life of all men throughout history: he is part of the world and it is part of him:

My world is cypress, and an English valley.
I piece my flesh that rattled on the yards
Red in an Austrian volley.

Because he imaginatively embraces all life and all death, he eventually embraces the death of Christ, the ultimate death (which embraces the whole of life in itself):

I hear, through dead men's drums, the riddled lads,
Strewing their bowels from a hill of bones,
Cry Eloi to the guns.

These soldiers at the moment of their agony become one with the poet and Christ.

In the poems which develop what the TLS called the "vivid sense of the correspondence between the forces informing the macrocosm and the microcosm", we find Thomas trying, in his own words, "to prove beyond doubt . . . that the flesh that covers him is the flesh that covers the sun, that the blood in his lungs is the blood that goes up and down in a tree."24 The integrity of all parts of the universe

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24 S.L., p.87.
and of the forces which act in them ("processes" in Thomas's usual terminology) is presented in terms of man's correspondence with nature and the universe. In "A process in the weather of the heart", the duality of man's nature is expressed in terms of conflicting images of nature: "night" and "day", "damp" and "dry", "sun" and "moon".

Inextricably mixed in man's nature are the elements of life-making and life-destroying, of fertility and barrenness, and Thomas explores the mysterious "process" which gives man such a nature, widening his terms of reference in the closing stanza to include the "processes" of the world:

A process in the weather of the world
Turns ghost to ghost; each mothered child
Sits in their double shade.
A process blows the moon into the sun
Pulls down the shabby curtains of the skin;
And the heart gives up its dead.

It will be noticed that the processes are what the 'child' in the other poems becomes inarticulately aware of.

It is in "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower" that this idea is given its best-known expression. In telling of a force which pervades everything, which is at once creator and destroyer and yet which is inexplicable, which binds man to it, creating and destroying him, Thomas makes most explicit his idea that everything can be understood in terms of the body; but his reiteration of the point that he is "dumb to tell" warns us against looking through the awareness of some omnipresent universal force for a philosophical statement. This poetry is a poetry of awareness, of the synthesis of a world rather than analysis; it presents states of existence and describes forms of consciousness, but does not attempt an explanation of anything.
Thomas synthesises all the elements of the universe, all the impulses and forces of which he is conscious, attempting to impose a unity on all creation through the unity of his imagery. He is most successful in a poem like "In the beginning" where the context and the narrative line are relatively clear. Man is wholly involved in the Creation: time does not progress for all time is present in any given moment:

The blood that touched the crosstree and the grail
Touched the first cloud and left a sign.

It is a poem which is directed more towards light than many others and shares a positive tone with the last poem in the book, "All all and all the dry world's lever," in which the fear of destruction caused by love is set aside because from the fusion of all that seems disparate and irreconcilable comes growth, vitality and maturity:

Flower, flower the people's fusion,
0 light in zenith, the coupled bud,
And the flame in the flesh's vision.
Out of the sea, the drive of oil,
Socket and grave, and brassy blood,
Flower, flower, all all and all.

The exploration of a world of contradictions, tensions created by the coexistence of polarized forces and of gruesome death visualised in horrific and foul physical images is continued throughout the volume. Without question there is sameness of theme and there is likely to be monotony, but that is not to say that the poems are not valuable, since the value of the poet's insight is a constant, unaffected by the number of times he expresses it. If Thomas overstates his experience, and it is difficult to argue otherwise, that is a fault to be noted, but it is not a factor concerning the importance and validity of the experience expressed. A selective
reading of *Eighteen Poems* can find that Thomas's vision, his unphilosophical embracing of the world is expressed at best in original, powerful, and highly telling terms which relate a uniquely fascinating, if often morbid perspective on some aspects of the human condition. When not at its best, the poetry is confusing, and seems to get nowhere. "I see the boys of summer" shows the tremendous potential (primarily sexual potential) of the "boys", whose identity is never explained. This potential is, however, complicated by the fact that it is a potential for both life-giving and destruction. Life consists for these young men of a conflict between such opposing forces and of the attempt to resolve the conflict and achieve both understanding and unity. In the last part of the poem there is some suggestion of a resolution of this conflict, but the poem taken as a whole does little more than to make a proposition: it certainly offers no answers. The young men struggle to achieve unity, to compromise between the opposing 'poles' of their existence; the only result as far as the poem states, is that there is hope that the struggle may be successful:

O see the poles are kissing as they cross.

Throughout his career, Thomas published the occasional poem on the theme of writing poetry, and although "My hero bares his nerves" is generally taken to be about masturbation, it also seems to be linked with creativity. If the "hero" is taken to be his hand, it is reasonably clear that he is writing of the thoughts and emotions which he wishes to express through his verse. Exposed by the hand, and the writing, his emotions and desires gain expression, even sublimation: the thoughts of love and sex are unfulfilled, but are at
least expressed:

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.

Through his poetry, Thomas can explore his world, full of contradictions and oppositions, and in the last stanza he speaks of how he can seek understanding through writing about these problems:

He holds the wire from this box of nerves
Praising the mortal error
Of birth and death, the two sad knaves of thieves,
And the hunger's emperor;
He pulls the chain, the cistern moves.

Whether his "hero" is his writing hand or his penis is immaterial, for the equation of his creative work with masturbation is meaningful. The notion of "stripping the individual darkness" involves a similar self-centred activity, and perhaps at worst is as exclusive of real human contact. Both activities are based on fantasy, not the reality of human life.

"Especially when the October wind" is a better poem and a clearer expression of his poetic craft:

Some let me make you of the vowelled beeches,
Some of the oaken voices, from the roots
Of many a thorny shire tell you the notes,
Some let me make you of the water's speeches.

The world in which everything is inter-related is the inspiration and source of Thomas's knowledge and understanding. His task is to interpret and express the world and in so doing find some meaning for his own existence:

Some let me make you of the meadow's signs;
The signal grass that tells me all I know
Breaks with the wormy winter through the eye.
Some let me tell you of the raven's sins.
Existence, when he considers it, offers alternative ways of escaping reality, as in "Our eunuch dreams," where he considers the kind of interpretation given by dreams and films. In the first two parts, he considers the different perspectives of dream and film, both of which offer only a false image; in the third part he compares them both, and finally asserts a more normal perspective, but without explaining in detail:

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 remain shall flower as they love,  
Praise to our faring hearts.

In a sense, this poem has something to do with the exploration through his poetry of what his poetry is or should be, but "If I were tickled by the rub of love" ends with what sounds like a statement of the poet's intentions towards his poetry. He asks what life offers in which he can place his poetic faith, but after considering the "rub of love" from various points of view, and after recognising the effect of time on love and sex, he concludes with the enigmatic claim:

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

No matter what value he can find in any form of love, time destroys its worth:

If I were tickled by the lovers' rub  
That wipes away not crows-foot nor the lock  
Of sick old manhood on the fallen jaws;  
Time and the crabs and the sweethearting crib  
Would leave me cold as butter for the flies . . .

His only metaphor is man, in all his mystery, inadequacy and mortality; for only in the poetry of man can he hope to find any value in the grisly joke which existence seems to be for him.
Of all the images of destruction, time as a hunter in "When like a running grave" is a most striking one, as is that of time as a tailor cutting man down. It is essentially a frightening idea, for time is all too easily identified with death which vitiates love, and indeed love-making:

No, no, you lover skull, descending hammer
Descends my masters, on the entered honour,
You here skull, Cadaver in the hangar
Tells the stick, 'fail.'

Time "Shapes in a cinder death," for this is the end which overtakes all men and everything connected with men, as it does again in "Where once the waters of your face," where it is visualised as "the green unraveller, / his scissors oiled, his knife hung loose." The sea with the processes of time becomes dry and barren: "The weed of love's left dry." But although time is thus seen as the destroyer which will dry up the sea of love as inevitably as the "clocking tides," there is faith in the poet, faith in what he mysteriously calls "magic":

Dry as a tomb, your coloured lids
Shall not be latched while magic glides
Sage on the earth and sky;
There shall be corals in your beds,
There shall be serpents in your tides,
Till all our sea-faiths die.

As with so many of these poems, there is little success in giving the reader a clear understanding of what the poet is referring to. The last stanza implies a sense of faith which will overcome the sterility of love as time pursues its relentless way, bringing death ever nearer, but the precise basis of the faith is not clear, a vagueness which is a common fault of many poems.

Finally, "I fellowed sleep" provides us with a poem in which
time, through a dream, is somehow telescoped so that the poet can
reach for a moment his heritage:

'My father's globe knocks on its nave and sings.'
'This that we tread was, too, your father's land.'

His vision is but a dream, however, and fades away, leaving the
poet's words as the only way of understanding and recording the
'words' of the living world:

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.

The meaning of the poems is no longer a matter of great con-
tention, for much work has been done in quarrying out meanings in
plenty. What remains in doubt is the value of what is said and of
the way it is expressed. Much disagreement occurs because the
simplicity of the poet's vision and the severe limitation of its
scope is in conflict with the dense, tangled expression which
conveys it. Because no great claim can be upheld for the significance
of what these eighteen poems are about, critics have concentrated on
the question of whether so much surface complexity, such tortured
syntax and such fiery rhetoric form an appropriate and effective
vehicle for the experiences described or rather obscure a poverty of
thought with a smoke-screen of superficially impressive complexities
and flourishes.

Thomas was aware of the unusual nature of his writing, both in
terms of its content and of its manner, and when on several occasions
he justifies or explains his technique, he admits again to a belief
that the poet is not answerable to any precept or rule:
There is no necessity for the artist to do anything. There is no necessity. He is a law unto himself, and his greatness or smallness rises or falls by that. He has only one limitation, and that is the widest of all: the limitation of form. Poetry finds its own form; form should never be superimposed; the structure should rise out of the words.\(^5\)

The refusal to admit to necessity of any kind other than form leads to the description of his poetry which sounds chaotic:

You asked me to tell you about my theory of poetry. Really I haven't got one. I like things that are difficult to write and difficult to understand; I like 'redeeming the contraries' with secretive images; I like contradicting my images, saying two things at once in one word, four in two and one in six. But what I like isn't a theory even if I do stabilise by dogma my own personal affections. Poetry, heavy in tare though nimble, should be as orgiastic and organic as copulation, dividing and unifying, personal but not private, propagating the individual in the mass and the mass in the individual. I think it should work from words from the substance of words and the rhythm of substantial words set together, not towards words. Poetry is a medium, not a stigmata on paper. Men should be two tooled, and a poet's middle leg is his pencil. If his phallic pencil turns into an electric drill, breaking up the tar and the concrete of language worn thin by the tricycle tyres of nature poets and the heavy six wheels of the academic sirs, so much the better; and it's work that counts, madam, genius so often being a capacity for aching pains.\(^6\)

Thomas's preoccupation with the physical is evident here, but most striking are the comments on 'redeeming contraries', contradictory images, multiplicity of levels of meaning, poetry that is paradoxically 'heavy in tare' yet light on its feet, all of which indicate a willingness to complicate his expression without reference to the demands

\(^5\) S.L., pp.23-24, letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson.

\(^6\) S.L., p.151, letter to Charles Fisher.
of the subject matter. There is implied the preparedness to be wilfully obscure by indulging in linguistic complexities for their own sake, not for the purpose of effective communication. Yet he had declared that his poetry should be useful to others, and moreover had elsewhere declared himself in favour of maximum simplicity:

I admit that everything should be said as simply as possible, that meaning should never be smothered by conscious obscurity, that the most prized ornamentations of style and phrase have to go under when the meaning dictates it. But that all good poetry is necessarily simple seems to me very absurd. Because I can understand the English of Mrs. Beeton, there is no earthly reason why I should understand the English of Manley Hopkins - or W. H. Davies and W. H. Auden. I see no necessity why the greatest truths of the world, and the greatest variations of these truths, should be so simple that the most naive mind can understand them. There are things, and valuable things, so complicated that even he who writes of them does not comprehend what he is writing. I admire the simplicity of Shakespeare; the easy language of Twelfth Night and the hard language of Coriolanus. I admire the simplicity of Mozart and the bewildering obscurity of the later Scriabin . . . It is the simplicity of the human that believes the universal mind to be as simple.

The familiar justification of difficult poetry - that it is the result of the complexity of the thought being expressed - is appealed to, but in view of the essential simplicity of what Thomas has to say in Eighteen Poems, the argument cannot be upheld. The difficulty of Thomas's early poems is not derived from the concepts and experiences being communicated, but because the words and images used in the attempted communication offer difficulties in themselves which have nothing to do with the nature of the original concept.

When Thomas indulges in verbal complexity for its own sake and not the sake of effective communication, it is the result of an

abounding interest in words rather than ideas:

I . . . have always been struggling with the same things, with the idea of poetry as a thing entirely removed from such accomplishments as 'word-painting', and the setting down of delicate but usual emotions in a few, well-chosen words. There must be no compromise; there is always one right word: use it despite its foul or merely ludicrous associations . . . It is part of a poet's job to take a debauched and prostituted word, like the beautiful word, 'blond', and to smooth away the lines of its dissipation, and to put it on the market again, fresh and virgin.28

On the same subject of revitalising words, he wrote that,

no single word in all our poetic vocabulary is a virgin word, ready for our first love, willing to be what we make it. Each word has been wooed and gotten by a vast procession of dead litterateurs who put their coins in the plate of a procuring Muse, entered at the brothel doors of a divine language, and whored the syllables of Milton and the Bible.

But consciousness of such prostitution need not lead us, as it has led James Joyce, into the inventing of new words; it need not make us, as it has made Gertrude Stein, repeat our simplicities over and over again in intricate and abstract patterns so that the meaning shall be lost and only the bare and beautiful shells of the words remain. All we need to do is to rid our minds of the humbug of words, to scorn the prearranged leaping together of words, to make by our own judicious and, let it be prayed for, artistic selection, new associations for each word.29

Again his own words indicate a danger, for in scorning the "prearranged leaping together of words" in favour of making new associations he runs the risk of avoiding the easily comprehensible statement in favour of the obscure 'new' association which the reader can not follow. Such a practice encourages the development of a private diction if it completely replaces straightforwardly meaningful expression dependent upon familiar denotations and

29 S.L., p.91.
recognizable connotations of words.

The principal and most limiting features of Thomas's early diction and imagery is its dependence upon human anatomy and physiology as a source, a process defended by him because he felt it the only way to embody the universe in his own comprehension:

I am sending you a few recent poems to criticise . . . Be as honest as I am with you. They are, I admit, unpretty things, with their imagery almost totally anatomical. But I defend the diction, the perhaps wearisome succession of blood and bones, the never-ending similes of the streams in the veins and the lights in the eyes, by saying that, for the time at least, I realise that it is impossible for me to raise myself to the altitude of the stars, and that I am forced, therefore, to bring down the stars to my own level and to incorporate them in my own physical universe. 30

He admitted himself that his source of imagery was also a cause of obscurity, when writing to Glyn Jones that his obscurity was "quite an unfashionable one, based as it is, on a preconceived symbolism derived . . . from the cosmic significance of the human anatomy." 31

The 'preconceived symbolism' is further explained in another letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson:

What you call ugly in my poetry is, in reality, nothing but the strong stressing of the physical. Nearly all my images, coming, as they do, from my solid and fluid world of flesh and blood, are set out in terms of their progenitors. To contrast a superficial ugliness, I do not contrast a tree with a pylon, or a bird with a weazel, but rather the human limbs with the human tripe . . .

The body, its appearance, death, and disease, is a fact, sure as the fact of a tree. The greatest description I know of our own 'earthliness' is to be found in John Donne's Devotions, where he describes man as earth of the earth, his body earth his hair a wild shrub growing out of the land. All thoughts and actions emanate from the body. Therefore the description of a thought or action - however abstruse it may be— can be beaten home by bringing it onto a physical level. Every idea,

30 S.L., p.87, letter to Trevor Hughes, January 1934.

31 S.L., p.97, March 1934.
intuitive or intellectual, can be imaged and translated in terms of the body, its flesh, skin, blood, sinews, veins, glands, organs, cells or senses.

Through my small, bonebound island I have learnt all I know, experienced all, and sensed all. All I write is inseparable from the island. As much as possible, therefore, I employ the scenery of the island to describe the scenery of my thoughts, the earthquake of the body to describe the earthquake of the heart.32

It was a bold claim that "every idea, intuitive or intellectual" could be reduced to an image of the body and one which Thomas never substantiated. The effect is a demonstrable repetitiveness of words and phrases, as was pointed out by the reviews, and an essential limitation of the forcefulness and generality of his expression. Just as the themes are narrow in conception, so the communication is confined in execution and every bit as ugly and wearisome as Thomas himself suggests.

Particular words and image sources are undoubtedly used excessively in *Eighteen Poems*, a point that is supportable by a few figures. In a volume which has a vocabulary of about one thousand words (excluding articles, prepositions, pronouns, etc.), there are just under one hundred words which can directly be considered to be anatomical or closely connected with the functions of the body. While a number of words are not physiological, the context frequently is, and also it is evident that the rhythms of these poems partly depend upon a large number of monosyllabic words. Of words whose source is the human body, the following are most often used:

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Blood 22 times
bone 17
death 11
death 13
eye 16
flesh 18
ghost 17
hair 10
heart 19

For each one of these words to appear as often as they do in a volume of only eighteen poems signifies a remarkable degree of repetition. Much depends on the distribution amongst the poems, for if a word were the key word in a poem, its repetition would be understandable within that poem. Yet 'blood' appears in no fewer than sixteen poems out of eighteen, and almost all the others are widely distributed.

Although these are the outstanding words, perhaps the most wearisome aspect of the vocabulary of these poems is indicated more by the persistent appearance of words on three, four or five occasions throughout the volume. The cumulative effect of this on the reader together with the seemingly obsessive concentration on images of the body (which may not necessarily use actual anatomical words, but which will still add to the repetitive nature of the poems) is likely to be boredom and exasperation. There is also an insistent effect of abruptness and vigour created by the numerous verbs of action, growth and destruction or similar forceful activities:

Blast, blow, bolt, bore, break, burn, burst, climb, charge, descend, dissolve, divide, drain, drill, drive, enter, fall, file, flee, flow, fly, grow, hatch, haul, hold, hurry, jump, kick, kill, lame, lay, leap, mix, pack, paint, pierce, pick, prick, push, pull, punish, pump, raise, ram, rattle, ring, rise, roll, rope, rotate, run, scatter, scrape, scratch, shout, shuffle, sink, slide, smack, spin, spit, split, spout, sprout, stamp, stir, storm, stride, strike, struggle, swell, tickle, throw, touch, tread, turn, twist, undo, unlock, unpack, unpin, weep, whack, whirl, wind.
Repetitiveness is easily established, and monotony is likely, but the important critical question left unanswered by the reviewers is whether the poetry survives as a notable literary effort, containing an experience and vision which will delight and satisfy. Satisfaction and delight come from a response to the content and the manner of communication. *Eighteen Poems* contains a rather chaotic and highly individualistic view of a turbulent adolescence in which there is a morbid preoccupation with the physical and often unpleasant aspects of birth, sex, and death. The reader's response to this may be favourable, although he is likely to find much of it tedious and some of it loathsome, but he will inevitably recognize the limitations of such preoccupations where they are not imbued with a sense of purpose and direction. The poetic attractions of sex are not great outwith the context of love, and the association of death with birth is merely disheartening without treatment of the positive features of the life they begin and end. Thomas's desire to encompass and comprehend the universe in terms of his body results in a self-limiting statement of the oneness of all things which is repeated frequently in different images and poems. Although there are several poems where the content is interesting, novel and of lasting impact, and although the experience contained in the eighteen poems is gripping enough, the final impression is that the poetry is confined and inadequately flexible in its response to life.

Where such limitation of theme is paralleled by a limitation in imagery and diction, the poetry suffers and it is only by selecting an individual poem like "The force that through the green fuse" where form and imagery combine to make a telling expression of the repeated
idea that any poem becomes memorable. Otherwise, it is the group of poems, the gathered idea and the collective emotion which lasts beyond the memory of particular poems. Thomas's technique is partly responsible for this, because the repetitive nature of the diction, imagery and the rhythms makes it difficult in memory to distinguish amongst all but a few of the poems. Such an idiosyncratic manner as Thomas's is striking in its vigour and its declamatory tone, but in his earlier writing it often lacked the flexibility and variation in tone to render it a versatile medium of expression. Only later, when he developed both a concern for others than himself and a stronger and more accessible narrative line were the best poems written; at this time, the fusion of self-centredness and obscure rhetoric was superficially impressive but ultimately dissatisfying. Much of the dissatisfaction derives from either the feeling that the effort demanded to comprehend the poems is well beyond the value of what is said, or from an inability to pin down what precisely a poem is about, a refusal to accept that a poem might legitimately gesture towards meaning through an impressionistic profusion of images.

Thomas eventually developed a style which was more lucid and which was generally approved. The main feature of his development was the insistence upon a narrative statement which effected a more accessible primary meaning. The most successful poems of Eighteen Poems are those in which the words function initially to create a meaningful context in which the connotations of words and images work to enrichen an already understood statement. The more the reader has to struggle to interpret images which are not grounded in a
recognizable primary meaning, the more remote the activity of the poem. The opening of a poem such as "Especially when the October wind," establishes straightforwardly a context, here, one of physical activity, time and place:

Especially when the October wind  
With frosty fingers punishes my hair,  
Caught by the crabbing sun I walk on fire  
And cast a shadow crab upon the land.

The progress towards the translation of the physical surroundings into the act of poetry writing is clearly delineated, but in a poem such as "When, like a running grave," the context is inadequately defined so that the base from which to develop understanding is insubstantial:

When, like a running grave, time tracks you down,  
Your calm and cuddled is a scythe of hairs,  
Love in her gear is slowly through the house,  
Up naked stairs, a turtle in a hearse,  
Hauled to the dome,  
Comes, like a scissors stalking, tailor age . . .

An effective image depends upon the reader's recreating associations sufficient to approximate to the poet's original creation: he will seldom appreciate all possible connotations, and will contribute some of his own making, but in order to communicate, the writer must have established common understanding at some point. This he can do through context and through the normal denotations of words, but if he neither creates an adequate contextual structure nor uses associated words denotatively he cannot direct the reader towards selection of appropriate associations generated by his images; worse, he can fail to evoke any meaningful response. The result is that the reader struggles to win through to the response which will make sense of the words because the poet has developed a highly
associative form of writing without helping the reader to form the same associations. The impression is made of a poem operating obscurely at a level of meaning which has to be leapt at rather than arrived at through progressive, guided and creative understanding. When there is added to such a fault the occasional failure even to provide a recognizable syntactical structure, the consequences are disastrous for communication:

Everything ends, the tower ending and,
(Have with the house of wind), the leaning scene,
Ball of the foot depending from the sun,
(Give, summer, over) the cemented skin,
The actions' end.

Where there is an understandable primary narrative meaning, it is possible for the images to work to enrich the meaning, atmosphere, emotional texture, and tone. The act of reading becomes creative rather than analytical:

In the beginning was the three-pointed star,
One smile of light across the empty face;
One bough of bone across the rooting air,
The substance forked that marrowed the first sun;
And, burning ciphers on the round of space,
Heaven and hell mixed as they spun.

The outcome is a memorable poem.

The reviewers' emphasis on technical matters not only derives from the thematic limitation but also from the apparent difference between meaning and expression in several poems or parts of poems caused by an obscure narrative line, despite Thomas's assurance in New Verse that "there must be a progressive line or theme of movement in every poem". Also responsible is his habit of stretching the connotative potential of words so far from associations which will be shared by the reader. Where the surface of a poem glitters or the tone bellows, it is easier to comment on the sparkle and noise than
to penetrate to an obscured meaning, particularly where the surface activity is far in excess of what is necessary to communicate the poetic experience. The trend in *Twenty-Five Poems*, appreciated and commended by several reviewers is towards the reintegration of method and content and hence the eradication of much of the early obscurity.
CHAPTER TWO

TWENTY-FIVE POEMS

In retrospect it is easy to notice how Twenty-five Poems contains poems both of the chaotic style of near-surrealism and of a more limpid style out of which was to develop Thomas's best poems. At the time, the main critical preoccupations were with the closely connected matters of technique and obscurity; faced with many difficult poems, the critical reader had to come to terms with his ideas of what poetry was primarily about and with the nature of poetic 'meaning', and presented with such apparent linguistic virtuosity it was only too easy to separate content from style in critical discussion. It is evident that there were three important areas of critical interest at this time, the question of how to understand the experience expressed in the poems, the poet's sincerity or the amount of conscious control he had over his poems, and the technical elements in themselves. The approaches made to understanding the poems involve discussion of how Thomas's poetic method works and involve serious disagreement between those who are bewildered by the lack of an obvious narrative logic and those who allow a poem to come clear gradually, by association and sound pattern before analysis can begin; and it involves the crucial matter of the poet's relationship to his poem and his reader, his perspective on his experience and his ordering of that experience. Ultimately, the issue becomes the question of what the 'meaning' of a poem is and what is has to involve to be of any lasting value.

The matter of the poet's control over his thought and expression is raised in terms of how necessary the verbal exuberance and the
apparently chaotic imagery is to the total experience communicated by the poem. This eventually leads to the accusation that Thomas is a verbal trickster, a fraud, but initially is more striking in its power to excite wild over-praise and more interesting in its association with surrealism. The third area of concern involves necessary and often helpful technical analysis, but it also ought to lead to more careful assessment of the relationship between the total impact of a poem and the details of its structure and expression than is apparent. At this stage of Thomas's career the descriptive analysis of his techniques was useful to the reader in giving him a better grasp of the kind of poetry under scrutiny, and hence a clearer idea of how best to appreciate it. In particular, where thematic and verbal monotony was a persistent point made against Eighteen Poems, rhythmic monotony is a fault mentioned of Twenty-five Poems important enough for closer study.

None of these points is independent of the others, and they are mentioned separately only for convenience; the reviews of the volume do not conveniently fall into any category, even if some do share a similar bias towards one particular issue, or display a reluctance to do more than attitudinize. Probably the best known attitude is the championing of Thomas by Edith Sitwell which began in 1936 with an article in the London Mercury (in which there is no mention of her earlier savage criticism of "Our Eunuch dreams"). Her support is eloquent but her criticism is mainly descriptive of generalities:

Nothing could be more deeply and truly the wholeness of love, than the lines:

She who was who I hold, the fats and flower,
Hell, wind and sea.
Nothing could concentrate for us a deeper sense of loss than the lines:

And she who lies
Like exodus a chapter from the garden,

with its evocation both of the lost Eden, lost for all eternity, and the thought that the beloved is the ground from which all the flowers of that lost Eden are grown.\(^{32}\)

There is a marked tendency to make a sweeping gesture towards some ineffable quality of a line or stanza, without precisely indicating its meaning or function. The nature of the beauties contained in \(18\) Poems is hardly defined:

The poem I have quoted shows an enormous advance on those contained in 'Eighteen Poems' . . . but these, too, contained many beauties. How fine, how true, are such lines as these, from Poem One:

I see that from these boys shall men of nothing Stature by seedy shifting . . . [complete stanza follows]

Apart from the dubious compliment that the beauty is obvious in comparison with a poem by Archibald MacLeish beginning, "Therefore I will not praise your knees nor your fine walking," the source and nature of the beauty and truth are not detailed. Instead, there is a promise that the poet will be great:

It would be impossible to exaggerate my feeling of excitement when I read this poem, so beautiful and moving for all its obscurities. Here, I said to myself, is a young man who has every likelihood of becoming a great poet, if only he will work hard enough at subduing his obscurity: I know of no other young poet of our time whose poetic gifts are on such great lines.

The obscurity mentioned is described as a failure to control his subconscious self, but there is amazing praise for the poetry when it succeeds:

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He is, at moments, a prey to his subconscious self, and consequently to obscurity; but from that subconscious self rise, time after time, lines which are transmuted by his conscious self into really great poetry, whose truth has been lived with most profound intensity, until it could be fused, concentrated into this strange greatness.

The extent of Edith Sitwell's attachment to Thomas's work is indicated in her foreword to Rolph's bibliography of Thomas, even though it understandably suppresses any memory of the original attack or indeed of this first praise:

I keep no diary, and have but little memory, so I cannot recollect the exact date when I saw him first. But it was in the autumn following his twenty-second birthday.

I had not seen his first book - I was living in Spain when it appeared, and it received few reviews, so I did not hear of it. But immediately on seeing the second book, I wrote to him, and shortly afterwards, reviewed it at great length in the Sunday Times. The review was followed by about two months of virulent abuse of him in letters to the Sunday Times, which I had the pleasure of answering. The attackers got at least as good as they gave, and the air still echoes with the sound of numskulls being soundly hit.

As I say, I do not remember exactly on what day he came to see me first. It seems to me now, although I was so much his senior, that he and his great poetry were always a part of my life.

As will be seen from her review in the Sunday Times, Edith Sitwell's criticism is of little value other than as a declaration of her faith in the greatness of the poet because it fails to distinguish with any precision the characteristics of the poetry.

A far more revealing prelude to the reviews of the second volume is found in the adoption of Thomas by Dents, who remain his British publishers. An immediate effect was seen in the balance of poetry selected for Twenty-five Poems. Richard Church, Dent's poetry editor, was anxious about their obscurity and unwilling to

publish anything that he did not understand. Thomas insisted that he had no wish to be obscure and had no knowledge of or connection with surrealism; he rejected Church's proposal for a volume of nothing but the simpler poems. He wrote to Church:

I think I do know what some of the main faults of my writing are: Immature violence, rhythmic monotony, frequent middle-headedness, and a very much overweighted imagery that leads too often to incoherence. But every line is meant to be understood; the reader is meant to understand every poem by thinking and feeling about it, and not by sucking it in through the pores, or whatever he is meant to do with surrealist writing.34

Thomas says that Church misunderstood him because of his obscurity, but that he has other simpler poems available - although he explicitly says that they are not as good as the more difficult ones. The readiness with which Thomas was prepared to show Church poems of varying difficulty indicates more than just a commercial desire to have his poems published (although this is obviously involved), it also indicates a genuine desire to satisfy the reader - where the reader has shown an intelligent interest. Yet when faced with a reviewer who criticised the weakness of the 'tidy' poems, Thomas was as willing to agree with him and speak about having 'given in' to criticism:

And I agree with what you said about some of the poems being 'tidy enough' but so weak in contrast with some of the earlier bits of explosive bombast; that's true and perhaps I was silly in allowing those 'tidy' poems to appear more as a concession to obscurity-decriers than anything else.35

This letter to Glyn Jones about his review of Twenty-five Poems shows Thomas's reputed willingness to adapt to the person he was addressing, but is likely that a private letter to a friend expresses a genuine

34 S.L., p.161. The faults listed correspond closely to those mentioned by the reviewers of Eighteen Poems which either shows good self-criticism or that he had read the reviews.

35 S.L., pp.177-178, dated December 1936.
regret that he had had to compromise and include poems he thought to be weak. His regret does not affect the fact of the compromise or the fact that a vital piece of criticism affected his poetry even before its publication. The power of editorial criticism did much to encourage critics who floundered in the 'difficult' poems but saw real talent in the more accessible ones.

Whatever his real feelings, Twenty-five Poems contains some 'simpler' poems alongside the difficult ones - a division in kind which has caused a considerable amount of comment - and the fact remains that many critics prefer them to the others. It is now known that these simpler poems were earlier ones, so that comments in the reviews about a development towards clarity must be treated with caution; but because these poems were published at this time and because it is most unlikely that the poet did not revise them for the event, they can be presumed to be the poems which he wished to be read at the time. The date of composition has its significance, but it is also significant that these more lucid poems were chosen by the poet for Church's consideration, and so it would not be accurate to treat them as if they were published completely against Thomas's will and represent a style which is not characteristic.

If he was giving in to the 'obscurity-decriers', his poetry was nonetheless responding to criticism, and responding in a way which was to mark a continuing development towards clarity, greater critical acceptance, and towards better, more memorable poetry. It was as well that his resistance was overcome, but it must be remembered that the 'easier' poems are Thomas's, and in retrospect, more typical than the most obscure ones.

The reviews of Twenty-five Poems inevitably show a change in the
critics' approach, for most reviewers are now interested in Thomas's poetry for what adds to his first volume. They look for signs of improvement, the removal of earlier faults, the development of strengths, new themes and new techniques founded on a consolidation of his earlier achievement; and because they are dealing with a young poet, they are still looking forward and assessing the poet's future potential. Some criticism is based on a comparison with Eighteen Poems - a straightforward task because of the uniformity of the poems in the collection - and there is some disappointment at a loss of energy, yet qualified by encouraging predictions of success. Already criticism is concerned about what other critics have said. Desmond Hawkins, for example, finds it necessary to comment on a top-heavy reputation, and Glyn Jones suggests that the monotonous finality of the first volume was "emphasised to excess". But the main area of critical discussion is obscurity; almost all reviewers comment unfavourably on the difficulties of comprehension created by Thomas's unusual style. Whatever else a reviewer has to say, he generally finds that all critical assessment rests on his particular view of obscurity both as a particular phenomenon of Thomas's poetry and as a feature of modern poetry.

Apart from his comments on other critics, Desmond Hawkins tries to establish what the poems are about and to distinguish Thomas from his contemporaries:

He is neither English nor American, he is not in any ordinary sense a political poet, and he has avoided the universities. His poems are written more for the voice and less for the eye than are those of many of his contemporaries, and his imagery is superficially less esoteric and certainly less topical.36

36 Desmond Hawkins, "Mr. Dylan Thomas," The Spectator, CLVII (December 11, 1936), 1058.
His general interpretation of Thomas's subject matter is of an attempt to reconcile the paradoxical elements of life:

Mr. Thomas is obsessed by the overlapping and interpenetration of organic and inorganic, subjective and objective, conscious and unconscious. Between each of these, for practical purposes, we impose a division; Mr. Thomas's vision is one of continuity of opposites, and in his finest poems he deliberately shifts the orthodox dividing line backwards and forwards in an attempt to state and resolve the paradox.

In noting that Twenty-five Poems is more difficult to read, Hawkins is not referring to any increased complexity of thought but to a more involved syntax, a highly personal imagery and a tendency to burlesque, matters which involve a loss of communication despite there still being energy and "copious, vehement thought." It is in the ordering of his experience that Hawkins finds Thomas wanting:

When in due course Mr. Thomas completes his exciting discovery of new material and sets to work to refine and clarify it he is likely to establish himself as a considerable figure outside the close atmosphere of fashion.

Although he writes of energy and of thought, Hawkins does not explain how these can exist in the absence of or with a loss of communication. No matter how much 'energy' a poem appears to contain, if the images which generate it fail to communicate, the poem is faulty; all it can offer is noise, arbitrary if startling images and exciting rhythms, all of which may be said to generate surplus undirected energy. His demand for a refining and clarifying of new material implies a demand that the energy should be real because directed towards adequate communication.

Any observation of an advance in the material of the poems is often closely connected to discussion of technical improvement, and eventually it is clear that it is in the ordering and communication of a particularly limited poetic vision that Thomas's strength lies.
At this moment, the observation of technique usually takes over and dominates criticism, as in Glyn Jones's review:

It seemed at times - this has been emphasised to excess - as though Dylan Thomas were fixated upon a single theme and upon one aspect of it, unable to escape from the attendant imagery of his obsession, or to employ any but a few hard-worked and heavily-marked rhythms that made him sound at times for bombast like a metaphysical Kipling. And upon reflection it looked as though this strange stylistic instrument he had discovered was after all one of very limited utility, capable of repetition and slight variation perhaps, but hardly of considerable development in any direction. Luckily, Twenty-five Poems shows that these misgivings were only partly justified.37

He believes that Thomas half realises that the earlier style cannot be repeated and exploited without relief, but that despite the increased variety of theme and rhythm there is a loss of power. He too regrets a loss of energy in poems like "This bread I break" ("tidy little poems enough"), which sound less chaotic but yet rather flat, like a parody of themselves. He does find familiar stylistic features, such as recognizable phrases, puns, juxtaposed words, twisted clichés and a preponderance of numbers, which are used "with gusto if not always with very much discipline." And he believes the vital principle of Thomas's poetry to be elusive, finally stating enigmatically that Thomas's problem is not knowing "upon what he intends to feed," and that the future success of his poetry depends on his finding out. It is interesting to note Thomas's approval of the review:

And about the review: of course I didn't think it was unfair; it's about the best I've seen of the book, and it helped me a lot; it really was constructive; I never knew, for instance, that I was such a numerical demon. And I agree with what you said about some of the poems being 'tidy enough' but so weak in contrast with some of the earlier bits of explosive bombast; that's true and perhaps I was silly in allowing those 'tidy' poems to appear more as a concession to obscurity-decriers than anything else.

37 Glyn Jones, Adelphi, XIII (December 1936), 185.
You're the only reviewer, I think, who has commented on my attempts to get away from those rhythmic and thematic dead ends, that physical blank wall, those wombs and full-stop worms, by all sorts of methods - so many unsuccessful. But I'm not sorry that, in that Work in Progress thing, I did carry 'certain features to their logical conclusion.' It had, I think, to be done; the result had to be, in many of the lines and verses anyway, mad parody; and I'm glad that I parodied these features so soon after making them, and that I didn't leave it to anyone else.38

There can be little doubt of the superiority of criticism which seeks to point out the faults which prevent a more effective communication over that which gestures as vaguely and mysteriously as Edith Sitwell's, and yet her Sunday Times review and the ensuing correspondence were important factors in the popularization of the poetry. Fitzgibbon remarks that

Her praise - particularly her glowing review of Twenty-five Poems . . . in the Sunday Times and her subsequent defence of those poems in the correspondence columns of that paper - did more to establish his reputation outside the narrowest world of 'avant-garde' poets than any other single factor.39

She praises Thomas as the most promising talent of his generation, a "promise of greatness" which she finds revealed in the strength of his themes and the vitality of his verse:

The work of this very young man (he is 22 years of age) is on a huge scale; both in theme and structurally - his themes are the mystery and holiness of all forms and aspects of life. He writes of the brotherhood of man with the mineral and vegetable worlds (as in the first poem in this book) - of

My man of leaves and the bronze root, mortal unmortal,
of the splendour and inexorability and fatefulness of spring -

Beginning with doom in the bulb, and the springing marvels.

38 S.L., pp.177-8, dated December 1936.
39 Life, p.201.
In all these poems, so strangely young in their strength and vitality, all things are identified with God, who is present in the "sensual root and the sap", where -

............... the summer blood
   Knocked in the flesh that decked the vine. 40

She praises Thomas's ability to control and organise the form of his poems:

The form of many of these poems is superb. The eighth poem, though not a sonnet in rhyme scheme or shape, yet by its particular motion, gives the impression that here, alone among the poets of the younger generation, is one who could produce sonnets worthy of our great heritage.

In passing quickly over the fault of obscurity, she mistakenly and confusingly ascribes the difficulty to the profundity of Thomas's thought:

The present danger and fault of these poems is their difficulty, which is largely the result of the intense concentration of each phrase, packed with meaning, of the fusion (not confusion) of too profound thoughts. Yet even when the poems are most difficult, the images coming from deep within the soul, from the profound heart of nature, have a poignant and moving beauty - as in the poem which begins with the line,

   A grief ago,

in which all the holiness of youthful love, the grief of loss to the "country-handed grave" (that simple nurse of grief, that country man growing flowers and corn) is concentrated.

The largely repetitive nature of Thomas's imagery and the remarkably limited range of theme belie the notion of profundity and it is evident that Edith Sitwell was glossing over the real weakness of the poet's style. The correspondence in the paper raises this suspicion and tackles the central problems of how to approach such poetry and what kind of meaning can be drawn from it. Sitwell's

desire to praise may have weakened her need to point out clearly the faults of which she was aware.

The review suffers in part from characteristic failings of Sitwell's criticism, notably over-pretentious statement without adequate support, but she wished to say as much in strong praise as was possible in a limited article and was tempted into being over-dramatic and deliberately provoking a violent response. Of eleven letters published in reply, two were written by Edith Sitwell herself and some of the others raise basic issues in the criticism of Thomas's verse, particularly that of obscurity:

These are not the verses of a young gentleman from the Congo who, eschewing cannibalism and Hoodoo, is cramming English with a tutor, but those of a native of this island. What do they mean? ...... The 'Modernists', as opposed to the 'Moderns' eschew clarity. Now I maintain that clarity is the perennial characteristic of all great poets - Homer, Horace, Dante, Shakespeare. I concede that poetry will never appeal to the plain 'man in the street'. It should, however, do so to the man in Intellectual or Beautiful Street.

I venture to prophesy that posterity will willingly let the work of our obscurantists die, despite the protests of the critics of Cryptic Street, Recondite Alley and Mystification Boulevard.41

Hare does not investigate the problems of understanding created by the great poets he mentions, which is a pity since the situation is in no way as simple as he makes out. Shakespeare is often obscure enough to cause difficulties, and so a clearer distinction needs to be drawn between what Hare calls "clarity" and what could be understood by "obscurantist", as one who deliberately obscures in order to impress the gullible. Alternatively there is a manner which is largely offensive to the reviewer rather than the poet:

41 Kenneth Hare, The Sunday Times (November 22, 1936), p.9.
The dithyrambs of Miss Edith Sitwell about a new poet whom she has discovered will have amazed some poetry lovers and amused others.

There are three motives which actuate some discoverers of a new writer. Firstly there is the desire for notoriety. But as Miss Sitwell occupies, temporarily at least, a minor niche on the foothills of Parnassus, that cannot apply to her. Fleming quotes from an article of his own published in The Poetry Review, in which he had claimed that a delight in puzzles and enigmas was the basis of delight in modern poetry, and proceeds to outline a third motive for 'discovering' a new poet:

I affirm that the worshippers of the unintelligible in poetry - and in painting and sculpture - are really worshippers of their own cleverness, victims of the Narcissus complex.

Such rudeness, no matter how justified, has nothing to do with the poetry, but is a consequence of a kind of support Thomas's poetry gained because of its unusual qualities.

Several of the letters pick out isolated lines and attempt to prove or disprove that Thomas wrote meaningless poetry, but Pamela Hansford Johnson's contribution offers advice on how to approach the problem of understanding:

For the most part, the critics (I except Miss Sitwell) of the work of Mr. Dylan Thomas take instant fright and are content to tweak his tail through the bars. Mr. Thomas, they say, is all sorts of queer things, including a Marx brother. Admittedly the business of analysing his work and of assessing its worth is a tough job for them.

Miss Sitwell starts from scratch, admits the poet's obscurity, forces him into no specific compartment, and does not waste space making little jokes. What she does is to quote so intriguingly out of context that several bewildered readers, who have apparently made no reference to the book, gaily pounce upon her.

I suggest to the vast majority who find the work of this extraordinary poet incomprehensible that they should approach it by reading it aloud to themselves. Then, when

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the music of the words is revealed to them, and when they
catch some disturbing echo of the thunderous metaphysics
and symbolisms embodied in it, they may willingly undertake
the more detailed analysis that work of this splendour
demands.

Mr. Dylan Thomas is a very young man. When he learns
that he must make himself clear to others than himself, he
will be a very great poet. Even now I dare state that, with
the possible exception of Mr. James Joyce, he is the greatest
living master of words.43

Her advice is refreshingly sensible, but her suggestion that one
should approach the poetry through reading aloud and becoming aware
of its suggestiveness and "the echo of the thunderous metaphysics"
is unlikely to satisfy any reader who expects a poem to be presented
in an immediately comprehensible literal statement. She expects a
readjustment of approach which many did not accept, but does not allow
that to blind her to the need for communication: she points to a way
of understanding but equally demands that the poet be understandable.

The theory behind Miss Johnson's ideas is expressed in another
letter in which the matter of the 'surface' of the poetry is raised:

May I attempt to elucidate the problem briefly by asking
this vital question: does poetry need an outward logical
and syntactical clarity?

Modern poetry believes this traditional "surface"
clarity superfluous. Does it not often defeat poets as
well as readers, who all too frequently content them¬
selves with metrical facility and technical virtuosity -
to the detriment of the emotional and spiritual
esse nce
of poetry?

In Mr. Dylan Thomas's poetry there is no surface, no
rational meaning, and need there be? If we think so,
then it is this aesthetic theory which we must attack.
The modern poem is rather the juxtaposition of powerfully
conceived symbols, which induce through the poetic sensibility
of the reader the emotional statement which in the poetic
gave rise to the poem. It is an incantation, externally
meaningless even for the poet himself - except by way of
psychological analysis.

43 Pamela Hansford Johnson, The Sunday Times (November 29, 1936),
p.9.
This modern poetry is like modern painting, music and architecture - frees itself from ornamental redundancies and "gets down to it".44

Dow's ideas are in keeping with the explanation of Thomas's obscurity offered by Trevor Hughes which involve the same far-reaching issues:

The obscurity of these poems is a reaching out beyond our conceptions of the associations of ideas and the limitations of words.45

Dow's criticism that poets and readers are too often content with technical virtuosity and Hughes' idea of reaching beyond the limitations of words indicate a crucial issue which underlies the various responses of the reviewers. Certainly poetry can and must stretch the significance of words in association to a point at which there is no way of stating their multiple meanings in simple prose, but the idea of poetry's going entirely beyond the poet's or reader's conception is mistaken if poetry is to be at all meaningful. Writing which reaches beyond the limitations of words may be a form of code whose relationship to a commonly understood language is arbitrary and must be shared - that is not the way of a poem which must make a verbal statement of the poet's experience that is eventually recognizable to the reader. Dow's suggestion that we must attack the aesthetic theory if anything is sound, for we see the need to reject an over-dependence on technical devices for their own sake and to demand the integration of imagery, metrical and sound patterns in conveying and enriching the experience through recognizable associations and a well-established context.

Many references are made to the 'surface' of a poem, but it is misleading to relate the term to its "outward logical and syntactical

clarity"; for where there is such clarity, it is the core of the poem's expression. Critical discussion of the elements of linguistic expression, of patterns and of structure can lead to a dualistic approach to style and content whereas such techniques are not attached to a poem, but are the poem, their function being to evoke in the reader the appropriate intellectual and emotional activity which was aroused in the poet when the thought, idea, situation or experience was in his mind. Although there is a place for ornamentation in poetry, no poem will satisfy on pleasing decoration alone, and when technical discussion appears to deal with 'surface' matters, it is merely analysing the methods by which the total experience is conveyed; where one can truly speak of a surface that is somehow separable from the experience stated, it is either a matter of ornamentation (acceptable but of limited appeal) or of a poem whose medium of expression is not totally committed to expressing the experience but is rather indulgently allowed to be its own end. Where such a surface is found, as in many of Thomas's poems of this period, it distracts the reader from the proper function of the poem by causing him to read the poem in an inappropriate way.

Rejection of Thomas's poetry at this time is partly a result of not appreciating the need Pamela Hansford Johnson expressed of allowing the impact of a poem to guide one into appropriate analysis and hence failing to reach the emotional essence of the poetry. Distracted by externalities, readers were not able to engage in the proper activity of reading. The meaning of a poem is the very heart of it, it is the sole justification of its existence, and the reading of a poem is a creative act during which the basic subject is immediately grasped, to be worked upon, not at random, but guided as
it were by the imagery, the sound effects, the rhythms and so on, until the reader is experiencing an enriched understanding of the central theme. The success of the poetic communication depends upon how thoroughly the poet recreates in the reader the active experience of the poem which he went through in its composition; this he hopes to achieve by the skills of his craft. The success of the reading of a poem depends upon the receptivity to the creative impulses of the expression and to the extra contribution brought to the poem by the reader's own sensibility. Thus, the surface of a poem is what is reached at the end of the recreative process which is reading a poem. If the poem first attracts by superficial meretricity it diverts from the central impulse and weakens the entire fabric of the poem, and so any discussion of the conflict between surface and meaning is largely concerned with the extent to which unintegrated and redundant techniques divert attention from the essence of the poetic experience.

Provided the poem can be entered, provided there is sufficient clarity of syntax and context, the areas of thought and experience into which the reader can be guided by the techniques of the poem and the reverberations of meaning provided through the words are in theory limitless. Recreating the poet's activity may be difficult, and involve great problems in understanding, but the problem is best treated as one of creation, that one of difficulty is building up the necessary understanding, rather than one of penetration - a working outwards rather than inwards. Edith Sitwell was right to be impatient with a demand for immediate understanding, but her attitude needs to be qualified to include a legitimate demand that a poem must immediately present a sufficient basis on which to develop the
reader's understanding:

Poets and patient, are understanding of and sympathetic to the difficulties of readers who say that they do not understand and ask poets to explain.

Our only impatience is with conceited persons who proclaim that because they cannot understand a poem immediately, it has no meaning.46

The central issue in the present reception of Thomas's poetry has been firmly established as the debate over meaning, the extent to which meaning has to be accessible, the legitimacy of obscurity and the causes of Thomas's particular brand of obscurity. It is an issue taken up by the TLS review of Twenty-five Poems, written by the same reviewer as the notice of Eighteen Poems:

He writes in images peculiar to himself, but so intensely conceived that it is only when we cease trying to explain them to the reason that we begin to grasp the quality of the experience.47

The terms used relate to a privacy of idiom the understanding of which depends upon a mystic awareness rather than "the reason", yet it is in the 'simpler' poems that critics find Thomas at his best:

The most part of the poems . . . display a tremendous and chaotic rhetoric, the product of a boisterous, almost brutal Fancy, but unshaped by the power of Imagination. At its worst it is of the hymnal variety . . . at its best it becomes a really strong dramatic poem, as in some of the shorter poems.48

There is a demand for the experience to be orderly and a complaint of over elaboration of what is essentially simple:

the method too often seems to be one of redecoration and elaboration of a single bold line, so that eventually we find the poet stringing together his lines of monotonously equal quantity, till the cartridge of images hammers the ears of deafness . . . Imagination packs words with every possible social reference. Fancy dissociates them from any social reference at all.

47 T.L.S. (September 19, 1936), 750.
48 Randall Swingler, New English Weekly, October 1, 1936, p.409.
The use of terms like Fancy and Imagination merely emphasize the impression that Thomas's creative endeavour was often not adequately committed to the expression of his experience by creating an order recognizable by a reader (Swingler's "social reference") but rather expended in an isolated verbal activity relating only to itself. Thus Swingler rightly directs our attention to those poems such as "This bread I break", "Why east wind chills" and "Ears in turrets hear," which are "integrated by the force of imagination" and are not merely the product of a delight in manipulating words for their own sake.

Even where there is the kind of integration described by Swingler, there is a problem of gaining an understanding of the situation of a poem adequate to allow the reader to engage upon the act of full appreciation. The most persistent view is that the poem is introduced by a series of "rhetorical and sensuous effects" and we should not seek any "logical significance", for if we do not accept this we are unlikely to "attach much value to any sense that [we] may ferret out." Michael Roberts directs attention to the value of the "accuracy with which the poem expresses the mood in which the statement is believed" and minimizes the importance of the truth or importance of what it says, an acceptable idea, although it begs the question of the importance of the mood to the reader, for unless the mood is significant, the accuracy of its expression is not satisfying. Roberts is right to emphasize the primacy of the effects created rather than the statements made and therefore explains the importance of technical analysis. His comments on

49 Michael Roberts. See footnote 50.
the poetic method are pertinent to the problem of meaning, for he shows that there is not necessarily any precise definition of mood:

Often . . . Mr. Thomas's poems do not aim at crystallising a mood: they are variations on a theme which is first stated: "Why East wind chills and South wind cools", and then followed by a series of varying and contrasting images:

    Why silk is soft and the stone wounds
    The child shall question all his days,

and the lines are held together by pictorial relations and verbal rhetoric rather than by any developing argument or sentiment.50

This, says Roberts, is effective only for as long as the poet succeeds in presenting his images to our senses in a vivid fashion, for when he does not, the result is a monotonous jangle of sounds:

at times, Mr. Thomas allows purely verbal associations to run away with him . . . When this happens, the reader becomes aware of the words simply as items from the dictionary, and not as images of real things, and immediately the procession stops, and becomes a mere riot of noise.

The vital point in Roberts's criticism is that the poems do not convey much but that the best of them sound well and present a vivid description of mood or a sequence of images circumscribing a stated theme. The danger that a procession of images may lose touch with the mood being defined or become a "mere riot of noise" is the basis of most adverse criticism, but is also a direct cause of the inflation of Thomas's reputation, and of the refusal of some to accept his work as poetry at all.

The way this poetry demands acceptance of a method of conveying a sense of awareness of the themes involving so much allusiveness and repetitious obscurity led to extremes of reaction: yet the

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critic who saw it as a meaningless noise, sensed that there was also some grandeur in it:


Among all the poets who came roaring in on the flood tide of anarchy and opportunity a year or so ago, none made a bigger and better splash than Dylan Thomas. His crawl stroke was sensational, he wore seaweed in his hair and comported himself like a Marx brother, so that many feared he would exhaust his energies and drown.51

Despite the book being like "an unconduted tour of Bedlam, or a night out in the land of gibbering highbrows," Porteus appreciates that Thomas has avoided the "literary and political rackets" (not yet being aware of the literary 'racket' that Thomas himself fathered). The possible magnificence of the poems attracts because of its scarcity:

O nuncle, court holywater in a dry house in better than this rainwater out o door. It is a matter of taste; but Mr. Dylan Thomas' shower-bath is, in an arid age, extremely refreshing.

The compliment of being welcomed because there is nothing better, is too dubious to counter the major criticism that Thomas's verse was an uncontrolled outpouring of subconscious insanities. Nor was Porteus a single voice crying out against such artistic indiscipline:

It is obscure, not particularly interesting, but yet very striking and undoubtedly the imagery and language are always poetic. The trouble is that Thomas's poetry is turned on like a tap; it is just poetic stuff with no beginning nor end, shape, or intelligent and intelligible control.52

Spender's complaint that the verse lacks control and is unpleasantly preoccupied with a bloody and unsavoury profusion of internal organs is too comprehensive to note those poems in Twenty-five Poems which avoid these faults. The criticism of the volume required a more


52 Stephen Spender, The Daily Worker, December 2, 1936, p.iii.
discriminating comment on the different poems:

I am in a dilemma; the poems seem to me disappointing. True, I have not read them often enough. But comparing the two volumes I can see that now Mr. Thomas substitutes force for spontaneity, that he has developed a taste for cosmic joking, numerical conceits, private allusions. Some poems in the earlier style are chaotic and the rhetoric cracks; on the other hand, the newer ones, though simple enough are less individual. . . .

This simplicity (repeated in three or four other poems) is in strange contrast to the blowing and spouting, the eerie bombast of the rest of the book. "Now that my symbols have outelbowed space," one verse begins. Mr. Dylan Thomas is a born fanfaronader. He is also a really original poet; though for the moment, perhaps, wondering which way to turn.

Stonier's uncertainty is echoed in many reviews, the general attitude being that Thomas would be best served by his developing the 'simpler' style of writing; he is variously recommended to be clear to others than himself and to develop the more "academic style" which reveals his "gift of phrase and integrity of vision." The most explicit comment on the divergent styles of Twenty-five Poems was in New Verse:

These poems strike one immediately because of their resonance (sometimes their rhythm is monotonous), their swirl of vigorous images, and, even before they are understood, their flavour of psychological and metaphysics. They divide more or less clearly into sense and nonsense-poems.

Both kinds of poem are said to be 'rhetorical', by which the reviewer means that "they are word-poetry, that they made great use of symbols and little of direct statement, that they build to the side of their subject and that the complete poem is then, so to speak pointed at its subject." The difference lies in the last part of

53 G. W. Stonier, "Out Elbowing Space," New Statesman and Nation XII (1936), 482.
this definition: the 'nonsense-poems', he says, do not get pointed at any subject. The nine poems listed as sense-poems are "This bread I break was once the oat," "Shall gods be said to thump the clouds," "Out of the sighs a little comes," "Here in this spring, stars float along the void," "Why east wind chills and south wind cools," "Ears in the turrets hear," "The head that signed the paper felled a city," "Should lanterns shine, the holy face" and "I have longed to move away." It is surprising that he does not include "And death shall have no dominion" (a poem of undoubted clarity) especially when he implies that all the remaining poems are of the non-sense kind. Two faults in the sense-poems are pointed to: the tendency to be over literary and the use of images which "instead of poetically illuminating a thing and its significance, simply fix and decorate the thought about it," but the main attack is directed at poems which are not 'pointed at' their subject.

The faults ascribed to the non-sense poems include being loud, "giddily crammed with images" and full of private reference; he is sure they have been "worked over" and not surrealist, but is convinced that such poems do a disservice to poetry:

Particularly at a time when [it] has a small audience and a great many enemies, it does seem to me that this sort of writing is . . . harmful. It seems a pity, when poetry is losing its squint and is getting the corresponding power to use the concise and direct statement, that highly allusive and spinning-its-web-in-the-corner poetry should be written at all, even when it is good of its kind.

Poems which are wilfully 'spun in a corner' do not gain lasting recognition but the orthodox claim that the material can only be presented in such a difficult way has to be answered; and yet in Thomas's career, it was the growth of an accessible expression which
proved most valuable to him and most acceptable to his public. It is therefore possible to exaggerate the harmful effect of such obscurity when it has been succeeded by more comprehensible work, but the idea that obscurity is caused by a failure to 'point the poem at its subject' needs consideration; for a poem cannot be created to express a given theme and then be pointed at that theme as if separate from it. But the idea is meaningful if it is taken to say that a poet may avoid stating the foundation of his thought and merely give a stage in its later development, as if he were missing out the first steps in the conception of the poem. The impression would then be of a set of images divorced from its original impulse but possibly 'pointing to' the idea originating it; the impression would correspond to the belief that in the least successful poems there is a 'surface' operating at a level separated from the actual meaning of the poem. The further the expression is removed from the primary meaning, the less chance the reader has of recreating the poet's thought and feeling and the more he has to depend on analysis or even inspired guess work. A poem must contain its original concept in an expression which establishes a primary context out of which the whole poem grows, for without it, the reader cannot actively follow that growth. A sharp division of the contents of Twenty-five Poems into sense and nonsense poems according to the criterion of whether the poem is obliquely pointed at its subject, is superficially attractive but impossibly clear-cut; the poems variously succeed in creating an effective communication, being most successful where they clearly imply their basic theme, and most obscure where the images do not initially create an impression of what the central experience is, but seem to operate in a frenzy of insubstantial bits and pieces.
Thomas's failure to establish a context for some of his poems gives rise to the complaint that his imagery is 'private' and that his method is surrealistic, but the most persistent reaction shows that most readers were puzzled by the variance in quality in Twenty-five Poems. Where one critic complains that there is "nothing at the head of any [poem] to hint at what it is about, and very little in the body either," C. Day Lewis's opinion that the imagery contains images that are clear and evocative despite some of the verse being deliberate nonsense, is the more common, and the more balanced. He argues that some of the poems "present a self-imposed unity beneath the apparently aimless flux of imagery," and it is this unity, the intoxicated use of words and the "nervous exacerbation" which appeals in such poems as "And death shall have no dominion". Yet the problem of meaningfulness remains when a reviewer can describe poems as being meant to be nonsense, and use terms such as "aimless flux of imagery," the situation allows critics to write of surface felicities as if they can have a valid existence in the absence of meaning. It is this kind of ambivalent response which pervades the criticism and weakens much of it. When a "child of the Victorian Day, who loves the sweetness and lucidity of Tennyson, who even swims in the enjoyment of Lewis Morris, who still turns to Wordsworth for sustenance" says that he cannot understand many of the poems but knows that he is thereby the loser being thrilled by the few he understands, he illustrates a crisis in Thomas's poetic development and a frustrating critical situation of uncertainty.58

57 C. Day Lewis, Life and Letters Today, XV (Autumn 1936), 37.
One of the several uncertainties was the relationship of Thomas’s work with surrealism, an issue raised at this time but which is better considered more closely with reference to Treccoe’s later article. Comments on surrealism were generally limited to claiming a connection with that part of surrealism pertaining to the absence of conscious control over images, without regard to the surrealists objectives, but Michael Cullis, in Purpose, by stating Thomas’s work to be the one example of an "original, effective and, within limits, contemporary exemplification" of surrealism as a "central method" seems to intend more. Certainly his comment on Thomas’s language would indicate that he was thinking of more than a mere irrational flow of words:

"[It] is more remarkable even than Auden’s - or, at any rate, freer - possibly because it is quite unreined. The richness of this factor in Auden’s verse comes from his intelligence and his interest in the world outside him. Dylan’s language is subjective, with its roots in the sub- or at most half-conscious."

More characteristic of the comments of the time is the type of dogmatic assertion that images, though startling, have no "conscious relation to one another," that they are thrown together violently and on occasion merely lead to "the production of competent nonsense." Even if such comments do not adequately account for the various poems in the volume (and the reviewer was more complimentary than they suggest), it was better criticism to fault Thomas for his undoubted obscurity on the grounds that it was the result of a lack of conscious control than to give credit to the capacity of the verse

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59 Michael Cullis, "Mr. Thomas and Mr. Auden," Purpose, IX (April-June 1937), 101.

60 G. B. E., The Crania, XLVI (October 21, 1936), 59.
to do more than words can possibly do, to write of a drunken wordiness responsible for "sounding phrases that go beyond meaning and convey, more by music than sense, the apocalypse that has been the poet's undoubted vision."^1

Musicality may appear more important to Thomas than the straightforward sense of his words, but "phrases that go beyond meaning" must be unintelligible, and whatever else a poem does it must make sense in that it communicates a significant verbal statement which is about or goes towards creating understanding of the poet's experience. Warren is on surer ground when he speaks of the effects created by the verse, such as a 'revivalist' effect caused by "plangent rhythms," or a "fiery passion and a sustained and considerable religious sense" which relates him to Donne, Nash, Webster and Tourneur by supporting themes of "growth and decay, love and death, and the pressure of time." It is important to avoid any risk of accrediting such 'wordy' poetry with too much and to insist, as Warren generally does, that the function of metaphor is to convey sense whereas verbal virtuosity can only offer the 'glitter':

The integrity of the metaphors themselves and the lucidity of the simpler poems in this collection are evidence that this is more than romantic bluff. Meanwhile these half-intelligible poems, with their verbal dazzle and song, make better reading than many more dully intelligible verses.

Not only can the superficial impact of Thomas's language create an artificial attractiveness to be applauded by a critic like Edith Sitwell or distorted by literary cranks to suit their strange theories, but its apparent concreteness can create the mistaken impression that

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Thomas is defining his experience:

Mr. Thomas' poetry is exciting. There is no watery dilution in it; everything is intense and potent as crystals. The image takes the place of the allegory, and the metaphor that of the simile; and these are bound up with allusion and antithesis in forms of daedal beauty. No vague romantic moods and abstractions; all is tangible and concrete. In this he is almost Shakespearean. These concrete symbols are words which stir subconscious memories, and their "atmospheres," brought together, produce strange lightning flashes that flicker through the mind, giving the words a new and electrifying implication.62

The supposed concreteness of the metaphorical expression is confusingly said to show Thomas attacking the fear and despair arising from the spiritual aridity of post-war Europe through mystery. Certainly "all is tangible and concrete" but there is nothing crystalline about the import of the poems: on the contrary, there is a constant sense of the mysterious derived from the images rather than clarified and defined by them, evidenced by the way the same writer is reduced to wide generalities in describing what has supposedly been crystallised:

And so his verse becomes at once cosmic and elemental, bound up in the eternal facts and everlasting arcana of birth and death, light and darkness, heat and cold, and especially of growth and decay. His poetry is heavy with awareness of the recondite and labyrinthine 'process in the weather of the world' that 'turns ghost to ghost.' Make in the grain of sand, and Wordsworth, in the meanest flower, saw eternity and the whole universe. Mr. Thomas, in a kind of obsession with Time, watches as if entranced the movements of some trifling thing or insignificant motion of the body, and sees in them events of universal magnitude. These actions become symbols of the cosmos.

Thomas's images do not make the intangible concrete, but the physicality of his imagery constantly refers to the intangible

forces of man and his cosmos, a feature of his method that is vital for it places such extreme importance on the power of his technical accomplishments to evoke the desired sense of the powerful and mysterious relationship between himself and his universe.

It has become clear that the reviewers were constantly being faced with the question of how effective and admirable such technical accomplishment was as well as with the problem of elucidating meaning and deciding what kind of sense was satisfying. While recognizing that properly any discernible distinction between a technique and the whole sense of a poem is at best an indication of ornamentation or at worst a serious fault in composition, we can accept technical analysis as necessary and valuable provided it is seen to contribute towards a better appreciation of the effect of the poem. Since the separation of a technique for critical discussion is an artificial convenience, the choice of what to discuss may be arbitrary, but matters such as metre and syntax are so vital to the composition of significant and memorable verse that they are closely connected with the present problem of the value of what Thomas has to say. The comments on rhythm are few, but important, and there is the seemingly unavoidable occurrence of contradictory statements from the complaint that the "British thump of blank verse" practically stultifies Thomas's poetry, to the opinion that he manages to avoid an earlier dependence on a monotonous kind of line. Michael Cullis's complaint about blank verse can be shown to be wrong, but his general points, if accurate, would indicate that the poetry could never be memorable:
On every page you have a rhythmic deadness (or almost a nullity, in the poems where blank verse is abandoned for a purely verbal pattern— even the few efforts at rhythmic cohesion in his first book are missing here). This is at its worst in the ten final sonnets, that otherwise contain the most interesting material of all.

Any poetry which displays a "rhythmic deadness" is bound at least to lose impact, if not to be a total failure. Wordsworth at his most rhythmically inept demonstrates the effect on the whole poem (as in "Peter Bell") but equally, there are many passages in "The Prelude" which show the versatility and grandeur of blank verse. The effect of Thomas's metrical skill must be considered, and it is surprising that little was being said about it by the reviewers.

There can be no doubt that Eighteen Poems showed a considerable rhythmic monotony: the reader need only listen and recognize constant repetition. Certain rhythms rapidly become so familiar that a serious lack of variety is apparent if the volume is taken as a whole. The most insistent pattern was said to be \( x / x x x / \) at the end of a line, and analysis shows how frequently it recurs.\(^6\)

The reader also becomes too familiar with lines which begin with \( / x x / x / \), the position of the pattern making it particularly noticeable. Since the two patterns occur in different lines, the proportion of lines in which one or other is found is very high.

In Eighteen Poems, one line in under five ends in \( x / x x x / \), one line in under six begins \( 3 x x / x / \), while about one line in three has one variation or another. In particular poems, there is even greater monotony: in "If I were tickled by the rub of live," "Our eunuch dreams" and "In the beginning," the incidence of \( x / x x x / \)

\(^6\) See appendix.
at the end of lines is as much as one in under three, and one line in two will show one or other of these patterns. There is no doubt but that these patterns are repeated so frequently that it becomes questionable whether they are variations or actually the norm - one line in nine throughout is identical, being \( x / x / x / x x x \) in pentameters and \( x / x / x x x \) in tetrameters.

In *Twenty-five Poems*, the situation is noticeably different; although both patterns appear, the incidence is less frequent. Analysis shows that now only one line in over fourteen will end similarly, while one in seven will begin with the distinctive opening pattern: the expectancy is that one line in nearly five will use one pattern or the other, which is a distinct improvement over the situation in the first volume. The greatest incidence of each pattern in any individual poem is one in five for the ending \( x / x x x \), and one line in three for the beginning \( / x x / x / \).

Yet the effect is still that the poems insist monotonously on the same rhythmic pattern until one poem appears indistinguishable from another. When rhythmic monotony is considered together with thematic and verbal monotony the sameness of most of the poems becomes even more apparent. The poems are memorable as a collection rather than individually because there is so little left to distinguish them; but the collections are memorable through the hammering insistence of the rhythms, the physiological narrowness of the diction and the visceral quality of most of the themes. The impact is of some magnitude, if only because Thomas has shouted loudly enough about the same things in the same ways.

*Twenty-five Poems* shows changes in Thomas's style and material, principally by the inclusion of poems recognised as 'simpler' ones,
which are now known to have been composed earlier than the more
difficult ones. There is no evidence to suggest that Thomas revised
poems for his second volume in order to avoid as much metrical re-
petition as there was in his first, but it is demonstrable that the
period during which he was composing the 'darker' poems was also a
period of considerable rhythmical monotony. Lines ending in
x / x x x / are principally a feature of the period from about
September 1933 to the publication of Eighteen Poems, thus largely
covering the contents of Eighteen Poems. The earlier poems which
form the nucleus of Twenty-Five Poems do not show similar repetition
(although it must be remembered that this rhythm is a distinctive
feature of Thomas's poetry at this time, and the reduction is a
matter of degree). It was necessary for Thomas to develop greater
metrical variety, for no matter how distinctive the rhythms of the
first two volumes are, an important result of repetitiveness is to
lessen the chance of rhythm's achieving a desired effect. Where
one or two variations from the iambic norm are encountered too often
they lose their power of surprise and eventually become established
as the norm, reducing the possibility of variety. The result is the
"rhythmic deadness" and nullity of which Cullis writes, but it is
inaccurate to say that the verse is stultified by "the British thump
of blank verse", and it is necessary to counter this by pointing out
the positive qualities of the metrical structure of the better poems.
Thomas seldom writes in blank verse in either volume; by saying so,
Cullis shows a failure to hear the subtle schemes of assonance and
half-rhyme which help to structure the poems, to appreciate the

64 See appendix.
syllabic schemes in many poems and above all, to notice that the pentameter is not often used without variation. There are certainly many ten-syllable, five-stress lines, but many ten-syllable lines only contain four or even three stresses while some contain six. There is an important fault in Thomas's rhymical control, but Cullis's criticism points to the wrong thing: it is essential to realise that with such frequent repetition of these two patterns, a regular five-stress iambic line cannot appear often.

The metrical structure and rhyme scheme of several poems from Twenty-five Poems show that there is some variety in the rhythmic structure and some effective patterning. The first poem, "I, in my intricate image," has a stress-pattern varying from six to two per line and a syllabic pattern of a fair consistency ranging from five to fourteen syllables in the line: the scheme of half-rhymes is abacbc. The following poem, "This bread I break," offers a varied stress pattern and a regular syllabic pattern of eight, eight, four, eight and eight syllable lines to each verse. "Incarnate devil" mainly has four-stress lines of ten syllables, but this is not without variation; half rhymes and assonance link the lines, although the scheme is not repeated in each verse. Not only is there little blank verse, there is evidence of skilful manipulation of stress, syllable and sound, as a closer analysis of a poem will show. A poem like "Now" is too obviously contrived with its regular increase from one to four syllables in each verse although it at least gives variety:

Now
Say nay,
Man dry man,
Dry lover mine ...
"And death shall have no dominion" is a fair example of the techniques found in the more accessible poems:

```
                    x / x x / x / x
And death shall have no dominion.

      / / / x / x x /
Dead men naked they shall be one

          x x / x x / x x / /
With the man in the wind and the west moon:

   / x x / x / / x x / / /
When their bones are picked clean //and the clean bones gone,

    / x x / x / x x /
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;

        x x / / x x /
Though they go mad they shall be sane,

         x x / x x / x x / x /
Though they sink through the sea //they shall rise again;

         x / x x / / x /
Though lovers be lost //love shall not;

           x / x x / x / x
And death shall have no dominion.
```

The number of stresses varies considerably here, the normal throughout the poem being four and the most familiar line showing a distinctly familiar echo of Old English alliterative verse with two stresses on either side of a definite caesure (for example, the line "Though lovers be lost love shall not" in which the alliteration is also correct). The breakdown of the number of stresses is as follows:

| Stanza 1 | 3 5 4 6 4 4 4 4 3 |
| Stanza 2 | 3 3 5 4 4 4 4 4 3 |
| Stanza 3 | 3 4 4 4 4 4 4 4 3 |

The number of syllables to the lines is as follows:

| Stanza 1 | 8 8 10 11 9 8 10 8 8 |
| Stanza 2 | 8 8 10 9 9 8 10 7 8 |
| Stanza 3 | 8 8 8 11 9 8 11 9 8 |

There is not an invariable pattern in the stanzas, but there is certainly an adequate correspondence in stresses and syllables to speak of a consistent pattern. The poem is certainly not written in thumping blank verse, but that is a negative point, for the
metrical does show a measure of positive achievement. The correspondence
in stress, and at times in alliteration, to Old English verse, creates
the same strength and vigorous rhythm of these early English poems:

Where blew a flower may a flower no more
Lift its head to the blows of the rain;
Though they be mad and dead as nails
Heads of the characters hammer through daisies;
Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,
And death shall have no dominion.

There are also features like the arresting concentration of
stress at the beginning of the second line, "Dead men naked they
shall be none" which quickly moves into the joyful and almost
triumphant measure of "Shall be one / With the man in the wind and
the west moon." And throughout the poem there is the isolation of
the all-important word "death" in "And death shall have no dominion."
These few points do not exhaust the metrical interest but they show
both that there is some variation and skilful patterning and that
the structure is forceful and likely to imprint itself upon the
reader, not so much by variation from an iambic pentameter norm but
by establishing as norm a four stress line with a distinct caesura.
The 'rhyme' scheme is not regular:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stanzas</th>
<th>Scheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stanzas 1</td>
<td>a a a a b c c b a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanzas 2</td>
<td>a b b c d e e d a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanzas 3</td>
<td>a b b b c d e e a a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

but to arrive at such a scheme, the reader has to accept half-
rhymes like "dominion", "one", "moon" and "gone", "foot" and "not",
"sane" and "again" and "sea" and "windily". To avoid confusion we
should not speak of a rhyme-scheme, but the point is that there is
without doubt a sound pattern which has to be accepted as part of
the formal structure of the poem, and therefore a point of variety
and interest beyond the possibilities of blank verse.
Rhythm and rhyme are techniques which may clearly contribute towards meaning or may less significantly offer aesthetic pleasure and make a poem memorable through structure and pattern; we are thus drawn again towards the central debate over what is to be accepted as meaning. The reviews of *Eighteen Poems* were fairly similar in response, but there is a diversity of opinion over the acceptability of the difficulties caused by style in *Twenty-five Poems* as well as a greater acknowledgement of the variableness of different kinds of poem. By allowing a mixture of difficult and less difficult poems to be published, Thomas not only left the obscure poems for the critic to attack but also left the accessible ones to be used as evidence of a capacity for clearer writing. There is an increasing awareness of the great part technique plays in such poetry and its obscurity; moreover, because Thomas was no longer the 'unknown', the critics are less concerned with introducing what was new, and more with providing technical analysis. They look for progress, for a maturing talent, and since there is little to be said about an advance in subject-matter, they rely upon discussion of the relationship between technique and the final significance and impact. Progress in criticism of Thomas is in the increased understanding of the nature of his poetry, of the crucial dependence upon the 'shine and shape' of his verse; criticism has thus moved forward from merely introducing a new book to a limited public (as it did with *Eighteen Poems*), to an analysis of the poetry's qualities, not so much in thought, but rather in presentation.

The central debate involves the differences between two views: the belief that 'meaning' can be a matter of a largely ineffable significance appreciated through the effects of images, sounds and
rhythmic patterns, opposed to the insistence that it is the function of a logical syntax and a clear though highly-charged expression. Despite some definite prejudice, the reviewers attempt to relate Thomas's poetry to a kind their readers would recognize. Where the reviews of Eighteen Poems were concerned with a new phenomenon, those of Twenty-five Poems begin to seek wider references and reach out to a wider audience through the national press as well as literary magazines of more restricted circulation. Such an audience naturally desires to fit the new poetry into what they know about and to be able to say that it is 'modern' poetry, or that it is like the Victorians, and so on. It could include the less knowledgeable and less expert, who would be more likely to have based their ideas on school text-books and anthologies than on avant-garde publications, and who would be less receptive of strange violent poetry like Thomas's. The widening audience was interested in fitting Thomas into its understanding of the literary heritage shared with the poet and so there are arguments about 'modern poetry' and a development of the treatment of his techniques from the descriptive to the evaluative. Later in his career, Thomas was treated as one who was involved in creating the literary scene, but in the early stages the literary environment was not of his making and so he was dealt with according to the extent to which he fitted established attitudes. The impression given is that it is only because the more simply and directly expressed poems correspond fairly well to what was expected that many reviewers were at all willing to discuss his work seriously: novelty that is inadequately integrated with the demands of the experience to be communicated may attract the admiration of some, but will quickly bore the majority. Thomas's poetry did involve at this
time the reactions of readers to novelty, and much criticism is seen as a response to novelty rather than to the poetry as a meaningful statement.

Novelty can too readily interfere with communication, for it firstly can divert the poet's energies from finding the most telling expression of his experience, and subsequently can distract the reader into undue admiration of meretricity or into such difficulties of interpretation that the central theme is lost. Communication is most seriously affected where diction, imagery and syntax are strange, where distortions of reality are expressed in startling images juxtaposed in peculiar ways, or where the reader simply cannot find his way to the basic understanding of the theme upon which he could build his appreciation. The poems of the first two volumes display a notable amount of experimentation which results in a flouting of conventional demands of syntactical clarity, and it is in those poems in which the narrative line is expressed in a familiar syntactical form that we find the context easiest to apprehend, and therefore the full richness of the poem's significance easier to create out of our immediate comprehension. In the poems in which the grammatical function of words and the relationship between words is occluded by unfamiliar word order, or by isolating the crucial words from their immediate grammatical neighbours with a welter of appositional phrases, there is an immediate problem in establishing the 'situation' of the poem, the contextual core of meaning upon which the entire significance can develop. By comparing "This bread I break" with lines from the sonnet sequence, the contrast is startling. The word order of the first verse of the former is familiar: the subject, verb, object sequence with no greater
difficulty than an adjectival clause in "I break":

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

The opening lines of the sixth sonnet, although they eventually make syntactical sense, leave the reader wondering just what the function of each word is; he struggles to find the subject and main verb despite the fact that the grammatical relationships are not unusual:

Cartoon of slashes on the tide-traced crater,
He in a book of water tallow-eyed
By lava's light split through the oyster vowels
And burned sea silence on a wick of words.

By inverting the normal verb object order, and developing a complicated phrase between the subject, "he" and the first verb, "split," Thomas is not being particularly clever but the reader's attention is already drawn to the obscurity of the images and his concentration demanded for their interpretation alone, and so any further complication is bound to add to the obscurring effect already experienced. It would be enough to comprehend "Cartoon of slashes on the tide-traced crater" without having to recognize it as the object of a verb which appears after two further lines of great density. Perhaps if the phrase "in a book of water tallow-eyed/By lava's light" were more readily understood than it is, the separation of subject and verb would matter less, but the difficulty of the words arrest the reader's concentration and demand his full attention so exclusively that he is hardly able to register the syntax of the sentence. Ultimately there seems no justification for the difficulties in the value of what, if anything, has been conveyed.
In "And death shall have no dominion," the attention is arrested by simpler techniques which emphasise the poetic statement being made:

Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot,

By placing "Dead men naked" in apposition to "they," Thomas makes use of three consecutive stresses at the beginning of the line to pick out these essential words and also prepares for the repetition of "they" three lines later, which carries as a result a stronger echo of the subject. The subject-matter, moreover, is clear, and although the images invoke a number of associations, it is from an already apprehended narrative meaning that further meanings develop. Neither narrative nor syntax are helpful in understanding lines elsewhere:

Now Jack my fathers let the time-faced crook,
Death flashing from his sleeve,
With swag of bubbles in a seedy sack
Sneak down the stallion grave...

When analysed, the lines are seen to have a straightforward structure (Now a, let b do c), but its simplicity is obscured by the two lines whose phrases separate the subject, "the time-faced crook" from its verb, "sneak down". Although the notion of time as death which steals life is easy to grasp, and the grammatical relationships can be worked out, this kind of composition poses the question whether such difficulty is necessarily caused by the difficulty of creating the desired significance or is more the product of a perverse delight in obscurity. Yet there is evidence that some critics found a dilution in vigour compared with Eighteen Poems, a weakness in the more accessible poems, and believed that Thomas was at a point of uncertainty in his development. There is little argument on the
last point, but a qualification is needed to point out the positive improvements over *Eighteen Poems*, particularly in the nature and clarity of his vision.

It is significant that Thomas should have told Glyn Jones that he was glad to be emerging from the impasse of the first volume. Whether or not he was influenced by the criticisms of it, as well as being influenced by Richard Church, is impossible to say, but there is demonstrably more clarity and variety of theme in *Twenty-five Poems*. Greater variety was essential if it was to be more than a mere echo of its predecessor, and if Hawkins was exaggerating to declare the "exciting discovery of new material," there is arguably a greater variety in the expression of common themes, from the familiar idea of death in conception:

The seed-at-zero shall not storm
That town of ghosts, the trodden womb,

through the unexpected political significance of "The hand that signed the paper," to the concise expression of the sacramental unity of life in "This bread I break." A brief look at a few poems demonstrates the greater interest of the poems, even if the final impression is that it does not signify much of lasting importance. Poems like "The seed-at-zero", "Do you not father me," "How soon the servant sun" and "Find meat on bones" are thematically and stylistically similar to poems of the first volume. They maintain a dependence on anatomical imagery, on a concentration of seemingly potent images which are often too obscure to yield their significance as readily as they might, and on sound effects which were also a notable, if less varied feature of *Eighteen Poems*.

The opening poem shows the poet exploring his own being:
In my intricate image, stride on two levels
Forged in man's minerals, the brassy orator
Laying my ghost in metal
The scales of this twin world tread on the double,
and discoursing on his poetic role as interpreter of man and nature:

My images stalk the trees and the slant sap's tunnel
No tread more perilous, the green steps and spire
Mount on man's footfall,
I with the wooden insect in the tree of nettles,
In the glass bed of grapes with snail and flower,
Hearing the weather fall.

His concern for the inseparability of himself from the natural world
is most forcefully realised in "This bread I break" in which the body
and nature are presented in the same images, such as "My wine you
drink, my bread you snap," in a manner similar to, but more complex
than "The force that through the green fuse." The distinct
suggestion of the Christian Communion and the references to the
Passion in "foreign tree" and "Man broke the sun" add a new depth to
the familiar idea of a universal empathy by underlining the sacra-
mental nature of this mystic communion of all things. In such a
poem there is a more definite advance than in those mentioned in the
previous paragraph where a direct comparison with poems in the first
book demonstrates little advance:

Half of the fellow father as he doubles
His sea-sucked Adam in the hollow hulk,
Half of the fellow mother as she dabbles
Tomorrow's diver in her horny milk. ("My world is pyramid")

Do you not father me, nor the erected arm
For my tall tower's sake cast in her stone?
Do you not mother me, nor, as I am,
The lover's house, lie suffering my stain? ("Do you not father me")

The same preoccupation with the womb, birth and sex not as matters
of spiritual or even psychological import but merely as processes, the
same sense of secretory imagery and the vagueness of the context
causing a difficulty in relating the images to a central experience
are observable; and moreover, there is the same sense that little of interest or impact has been made, that the experience (if any) of the poems do not touch the reader's own awareness of life.

Where the reader is aware that a poem is reaching out to him and drawing him into an experience that is at once familiar to him and a revelation, he is responding to those poems which derive a direct approach and a relatively uncomplicated manner from the clarity of Thomas's presentation of his subject matter, the clarity which is made possible firstly by his own conception of the theme and by the clear establishment of context; where there is difficulty in grasping the context there is a corresponding weakening of presentation:

*Light breaks where no sun shines:*
*Where no sea runs, the waters of the heart*
*Push in their tides.*

Because the literal meanings of the words used are far removed from the metaphorical implications of the statement, the context is not made immediately clear; such avoiding of a clear definition of the subject is troublesome, particularly to a reader unfamiliar with Thomas's usual habits, and is arguably wilful, since it is not beyond his skill to denote clearly the situation of a poem sufficiently for any reader to follow the expansion of meaning in the metaphorical activity of the words:

*I have longed to move away*
*From the hissing of the spent lie*
*And the old terrors' continual cry*
*Growing more terrible as the day*
*Goes over the hill into the deep sea;*

There are more poems in *Twenty-five Poems* which seem initially clear enough to indicate the poet's direction of development, and there was general approval of the increasing clarity. Disappointment
expressed at a loss in vigour is less easy to understand, for it is difficult to comprehend the nature of a poetic 'vigour' which can be diminished as the poetry becomes easier to appreciate: confusion need not be condoned merely because it is 'vigourous'. There was much improvement still to come before Thomas was to achieve the integrity of vision and its expression and the evocative power which characterize his most memorable poems; Twenty-five Poems can rightly be seen as a transitional work, of some merit in itself, but with a mixture of promise and uncertainty, as was realised by Glyn Jones: "... the fundamental problem of the living individual is knowledge upon what he intends to feed." It looks as though that is Dylan Thomas's problem at present. And upon his answer to it, it seems to me, depends the fate of his poetry.
CHAPTER THREE

THE MAP OF LOVE

A growing interest in Thomas is evident in the period leading to the publication of The Map of Love and can be represented by the work of Henry Treece, who was later to publish the first critical book on the poet. It is a period marked by the poet's interest in writing a surrealist quality of prose rather than by any major poetic development, and by the appearance of unsatisfactory and even eccentric criticism. The uncertainties of Twenty-five Poems are by no means resolved in The Map of Love, and the critical response is in no way enhanced by Treece or anyone else. If the period is noteworthy for anything, it is for the remarkably poor service provided by Thomas's critics; he unfortunately did not attract the right kind of attention. In two articles, Treece discusses Thomas's relationship with surrealism and makes an 'assessment' of his work; but he is heavily dependent on the "answers" Thomas made in 1934 to the New Verse enquiry. The assessment is disjointed and reads more like a review than an article, making statements on theme and technique more descriptive than evaluative. The second article also depends too much on New Verse, but the idea of analysing Thomas's relationship to surrealism is sound. The dependence of both articles on statements made some five years before seriously weakens them for between 1934 and 1939 there is every likelihood that Thomas changed his views if the changes in his poetry are at all indicative.

Treece finds the poetry significant in terms of Thomas's declared intention to drag the "hidden causes" into light, and its
capacity to give "a voice to the body, the glands and the nerves."

In describing Thomas's main theme as Man in his "fundamental manifestations," Treece is particularly struck by what the poetry is not:

He does not hang over gates, admiring daffodils and sheep. Nor does he turn longing eyes towards experimental political systems over the seas. His impulse comes, not from the vernal wood, but from within his own body, and almost any of the poems in his two volumes will bear this out. He is the poet within the poet, and is dependent upon no externalities for his subject.65

If the notion of a poetry which answers to nothing outside the poet is at all meaningful, the poems would be remarkably limited in appeal, but the notion is nonsensical. By giving a voice to "that part of the being which had formerly been inarticulate," to have given an 'aura' to the body, a mind to the body which thinks and speaks out in the poems, Thomas supposedly "is dependent upon no externalities for his subject." But the idea is expressed absurdly, for human life is only meaningful in relationship to 'externalities' and Thomas patently is concerned with his relationship with universal matters. He is confusing Thomas's method with his subject matter, assuming that the physiological terminology signifies an interest only with himself; it is a confusion between saying the "impulse" comes from himself (which is arguable) and saying he is not dependent on externalities for his subject. Treece seems taken in by Thomas's pretentious claim to expose "what has been hidden too long," and gives too much credence to the value of such an exercise. The poems are immensely powerful at times, and, as a record of the poet's "individual struggle," can often be fascinating, but merely to say that they give voice to the body and show how the body thinks is

meaningless and misdirected. The use of anatomical imagery is a means of expression and cannot be allowed a greater significance than this. Thomas's use of the body as a source of vocabulary and as an expression of his concept of himself in a pantheistic universe gave voice to the body in the sense of articulating its functions, but it is misleading to speak of giving the body a 'mind' with which to 'think'.

A major defect in Treece's criticism is that it draws our attention to the wrong things (a failing doubtless encouraged by the poetry's style); he describes the poetry as emotional rather than intellectual in appeal yet notes a formal structure and style of stanza pattern, alliteration and half-rhyme. He is right to show that formality of the structure coincides with exciting word control, but instead of exploring the relationship of form and words, he pursues a notion that the poems have "a faint echo of other days and other styles":

In Spring we cross our foreheads with the holly,
Reigh ho the blood and the berry,

and

In the beginning was the three pointed star,
One smile of light across the empty face,

and the passage,

'Time shall not murder you' he said,
Nor the green nought be hurt . . .

so reminiscent of:

Age shall not wither her nor custom stale.

The echo of folk-poetry, the reference to the book of Genesis and the Shakespearean allusion are all made clear, but such techniques depend upon intellectual recognition of sources and application to
the situation of the poem. Formality of structure too relies upon an intellectual appreciation, but Treece is more impressed by the emotional appeal of an "intoxicating use of words" as in the following dark impenetrable lines:

The patchwork halves were cloven as they scudded
The wild pigs' wood, and slime upon the trees,
Sucking the dark, kissed on the cyanide,
And loosed the braiding adders from their hairs;
Rotating halves are horning as they drill
The arterial angel.

Treece is not clear as to the effect of the 'echoes,' his criticism, descending into imprecise gestures towards an ineffable poetic mystery:

These echoes give an overtone to the statements, and are parts of his stock in trade as a musical, as opposite to an intellectual poet. And it is in this matter of overtones and atmosphere that Thomas is so successful:

Light breaks on secret lots
On tips of thought where thoughts smell in the rain,
or,

I see the summer children in their mothers
Divide the night and day with fairy thumbs;

In this latter, he attains a "poetic" atmosphere reminiscent of, and equal to, Tennyson's in "Now sleeps the crimson petal" from "The Princess."

The meaning of 'poetic' atmosphere has to be guessed at, but may suggest some element of late romantic luminosity and the distancing of the physical situation, but Treece does not indicate the kind of atmosphere other than by tracing the allusions. The purpose of referring to another work is to call upon the reader's awareness of the thought and spirit of that poetry and its period and using the awareness as part of his own expression. It allows the poet to create considerable suggestiveness in a few words, by releasing in his poem the whole force of the other work; but the weaknesses of
the technique are that there is no significance in the allusion which goes unrecognized by the reader, and that the poet may not make clear enough the very fact that he is alluding to other poetry. In *The Waste Land*, obscurity is caused by the limitations of the individual reader in recognizing sources, but the process is unquestionably intellectual. Only after the recognition of the source and the recalling of its nature can any emotional overtone be created. The recognition of an allusion or echo is 'intellectual' if anything, but there is little to be gained from that kind of distinction of intellectual from emotional, and certainly nothing to be gained by declaring the dominant emotional quality only to describe features requiring deliberate intellectual appreciation. Treece may be describing his sense of there being contrived allusions, but such reactions must be handled cautiously lest the association of the phrase with another line from a different poem is not evident in the poem, but is rather a feature of the critic's response; as such, it would only be of limited critical interest.

To examine the possible associations between the poems is made difficult by the vagueness of phrases like "overtones and atmosphere" and by the absence of close textual analysis, but a superficial glance at them is enough to stretch the probability of there being an observable association. On first consideration, nothing could seem further removed from "I see the boys of summer" than Tennyson's "Now sleeps the crimson petal":

Now sleeps the crimson petal, now the white;
Nor waves the cypress in the palace walk;
Nor winks the gold fin in the porphyry font:
The fire-fly wakens: waken thou with me.

Now droops the milkwhite peacock like a ghost,
And like a ghost she glimmers on to me.
Now lies the earth all Danae to the stars,
And all thy heart lies open unto me.

Now slides the silent meteor on, and leaves
A shining furrow, as thy thoughts in me.

Now folds the lily all her sweetness up,
And slips into the bosom of the lake:
So fold thyself, my dearest, thou, and slip
Into my bosom and be lost in me.

In gathering twilight and gathering silence, the world imaged in
this short poem contracts and expands in such a way as to parallel
the poet and his love. The poet's lover opens her heart just as
the heavens and the stars seem to open out and become clarified in
the coming darkness; the sharp daylight out-lines blur and shimmer
like ghosts, adding an unearthly quality to the lover's appearance;
and just as the lily in the lake is enfolded in the dark but friendly
waters, so the poet would enfold and safeguard his lover. The
'atmosphere' of the poem has an ethereal quality, a sense of fairy-
tale unreality and glittering attraction, but simply to describe it
as 'poetic' is meaningless. If Trecco means that the 'poetic'
atmosphere is created by diction and imagery which are somehow
'suitable' to poetry, that is, which are specially chosen for their
appropriateness to the creation of a 'poetic' surface which may or
may not be related to the content of the poem, he is unjust to
Tennyson whose diction may be archaic, ornate and romanticised but
whose discipline is adequate to ensure the effectiveness of the
words used in creating meaning and an atmosphere suited to the theme.
"I see the boys of summer" has no kind of 'poetic' atmosphere com-
parable to Tennyson's poem. Trecco gives no explanation of the
nature of his comparison, but leaves the two poems unhappily and
Inexplicably thrown together in a supposed relationship.

Just as unconvincing is his comment on the kind of complaints on obscurity which had by then been made, for it depends upon the same style of vague reference to a seemingly meaningful phrase; in dismissing those who had deprecated the verse's obscurity in spite of their acceptance of Eliot and Empson, he says,

Thomas is obscure, but only to the man who does not recognise the inner voices of the body, and to those who ask for a mathematical meaning or equivalent for everything in life.

Again there is apparently an idea that the anatomical imagery is its own end, rather than a medium for the expression of the man's vision of his own nature and his relationship with the world, as well as a failure to explain just what the inner voices of the body might be. Treece's literal acceptance of the "succession of glandular and physical images" as "essential to the 'stripping of the darkness'" is a limiting factor in his criticism; he does not attempt to justify their excessive use, and fails to make them significant of anything beyond their literal meaning. Eventually we realise that not only does he not consider what Thomas might mean in his poems, he does not even consider what he himself means in his criticism.

Treece continues to confuse when he relates the difficulty of the poems to a failure by Thomas to make his poem move concentrically around a central image; whatever he meant by that, the only likely meaning is that Thomas did not compose from a central impulse, discernible in the final shape and significance of the poem, and that poems are consequently uncertain in direction and disjointed in image pattern. But it is merely guesswork to say so, since Treece himself is not clear. In many poems there is uncertainty about the nature
of the impulse that generates the poetic thought, a conflict deliberately fostered amongst words and images, and the reader may not appreciate what the poem conveys, and yet a poem like "The force that through the green fuse" is structurally simple and of a kind which could be said to have a central originating image in the concept of an all-powerful, all-pervading life-force. There can be little narrative progress in poems like this in which a basic idea is repeated in a series of cognate, rather than 'concentric' images; Thomas's later success is most marked in poems with a strong narrative form. Any poet must have an originating impulse and write from a central theme; that much is a commonplace, but it is all that Treece is saying.

With praise for the qualities of his language and for his ability to transmute its elements, Treece further confuses by referring to its unique quality in spite of the "tones audible in his work, which are reminiscent of the Scriptures and the Elizabethans"; but such 'allegiances' of tone are subordinated to Thomas's main subject, man, along with "all phases of culture and myth," and because in pursuing this theme he seeks unity "within the individual body before unity within the State," his language is said to be difficult rather than private, and his poetry personal not social. It is all very confusing, and is finally capped by Treece's reference to Thomas's 'making clean' of the darkness surrounding the individual, without apparently realising the severe limitation of appeal of the primitive and unsophisticated. The entire article is based too heavily on "Answers to an Enquiry" and appeals too often to phrases so imprecise as to be misleading; Treece either skims over or avoids the major critical issues already being aired and even if he avoids excessive adulation, his "assessment" does not involve value judge-
ments and is therefore not a true assessment. At most, the article restates in the most general terms principles expounded by the poet several years before and tries to relate them to the poetry, but this is not a valuable exercise, since it was already becoming clear that the best poems were the ones furthest from any notion of stripping away individual darkness.

Thomas appears to have been more than a little unfortunate in his critic, but Treece's next article at least is based on a passing but interesting matter, the question whether Thomas's poetry bore at this time any relationship with surrealism. Again there is an over-emphasis of the "Answers to an Enquiry", and also an over-simplified view of the poetry and Thomas's methods in order to dissociate Thomas from surrealism, despite some considerable similarities. Although it is understandable that a critic should select lines which will most forcibly support his argument, he must not avoid material which does not fit his ideas; when Treece points out that Thomas claimed a conscious control over his writing in contrast to the surrealists disclaimer of such control, it is not enough to select lines like "horns of England, in the sound of shape,/ Summoning your snowy horsemen," compare them with Gascoyne's "image of my grandmother/her head appearing upside-down upon a cloud," and say Thomas is consciously controlling his writing. One can agree that the lines of Picasso quoted by Treece appear to demonstrate the anarchy of an "enthusiastic, though precocious, child playing aimlessly with words";

66 Henry Treece, "Dylan Thomas and the Surrealists," Seven, 111 (Winter 1938), 27.
think evening Angelus to see you shattered in the glittering mirror splintering to the blow of a clog blowpipe to see you nailed upon the quivering pond which stands out and rolls itself up in a pill unfasten the hung naked body of the loved one of the festoon of months remove your hands your hands.

It is less easy to agree that Thomas's lines,

Light breaks where no sun shines; Where no sea runs, the waters of the heart Push in their tides; And, broken ghosts with glow worms in their heads, The things of light File through the flesh where no flesh decks the bones, are "obviously the work of an authentic poet, who controls and is not controlled by his subconscious mind," not because they do not make sense, but because we have no way of telling how they were composed other than the poet's word. "The distinction," says Treece is "between the controlled and the uncontrolled subconscious," but the distinction lies properly either between what one group of poets say they do and what another poet says he does, or between the significance and value of what is actually said regardless of how it came about.

The selectivity of Treece's quotations obscures the unavoidable fact that there are lines of Thomas's verse where what is said appears as uncontrolled as any professedly surrealist poem:

A climbing sea from Asia had me down And Jonah's Moby snatched me by the hair, Cross-stroked salt Adam to the frozen angel Fin-legged on pole-hills with a black medusa By waste seas where the white bear quoted Virgil And sirens singing from our lady's sea-straw.

Because there is no evident difference between lines like these and those which are declared to be the "perpetual flow of irrational thought" (David Gascoyne), argument is pointless. What Treece's criticism does is to ignore the variability of Thomas's verse, the
strangely indecisive mixture of the apparently irrational and
patently rational, in favour of a denial of surrealist methodology
that is no more reliable than Thomas's own denial of knowledge of
the surrealist movement in a letter to Richard Church:

I hope you won't object, but I took the liberty, soon
after receiving your letter, of writing to a very sound
friend of mine and asking him what surrealism was,
explaining, at the same time, that a critic whose work
we both knew and admired had said that my own poems
were surrealist. In his reply he told me what he
thought the principal ideas of surrealism were, and
said that surrealist writing need not have any 'meaning
at all.' ... every line is meant to be understood;
the reader is meant to understand every poem by think¬
ing and feeling about it, and not by sucking it in through
his pores, or whatever he is meant to do with surrealist
writing. Neither is the new group on which I am working
influenced, in any way, by an experiment with which I am
totally unfamiliar. 67

A young poet with a facility for violent imagery and a delight
in verbal exuberance could have seen in the surrealist method an
apparently suitable approach or at least a suitable result, but
fortunately Thomas was also writing poems which amply demonstrated
conscious control and direction. An experiment so lacking in dis¬
cipline could not have survived for long, no matter how startling
its immediate impact. Treece was right to discount any great
dependence on surrealism because there were enough poems which
declared a formal intent and a conscious design, but he should have
provided more detailed argument and evidence, and particularly
treated the matter of the final appearance of the most confusing
of Thomas's poetry more closely. A reader has to deal with the
final utterance that is the poem and if Thomas produced his lines

the "climbing sea from Asia" which "had him down" out of a con-
sciously controlled intellectual process (and we cannot tell if it
was) while Gascoyne transfixed his grandmother to a cloudy steeple
in a "flow of irrational thought" there is little difference in the
result nor in its memorability. If a poet fails to communicate
significantly it does not matter how he goes about it; only when he
communicates is it worth examining his method. As in his previous
article, Treece avoids the most important issues; although it is
merely of academic interest, the lack of correlation between Thomas's
intentions and the surrealists' objectives is of greater critical
value.

The iconoclastic, revolutionary nature of surrealism is
fundamentally at odds with Thomas's poetry. It could not be said
that his writing did any more than play with the notion of resolving
"two states — outwardly so contradictory — which are dream and
reality, into a sort of absolute reality, a surreality," (Manifeste
du Surrealisme, 1924) or with the "total liberation of the mind of
everything resembling it." It is clear that several poems in the
early volumes are intimately involved in the attempt to resolve
reality and dream into sensible coherent order, but Thomas's poetry
is mainly analytic in that he takes his own being and looks deeply
into it in order to make sense of his existence, whereas the
surrealist would be more likely to see his task as creating a new,
liberated surreality beyond his conscious awareness of his own
existence. In these early poems, there is the sense of a world
that is circumscribed by reality but into which one can deeply probe;
when in later poems Thomas was creating a visionary's world of light,
legend and luminosity, it was done from an essentially rational
perspective on human life and could in no way be connected with surrealism. Yet in these early poems, the constant reiteration of images of destruction and creation, the unreal mixture of dream imagery with the images of conscious life, the sense of a search for some unifying power that would make sense of it all, and the pervading sense of unreality correspond noticeably with surrealist declarations. Thomas's declared wish to throw light upon the hidden depths of his personality and the characteristic impression the poetry gives that the poet is trapped by the horrific vision such a procedure involves relates to the declaration that surrealism "is a cry of the mind turning toward itself and determined in desperation to crush its fetters" (Déclaration du 27 Janvier, 1925). Even more noticeably, the attempts to make sense of the paradoxes of a life which in its nature is also death apparent in the contradictory, violently conflicting imagery are in keeping with surrealist intentions:

Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imagined past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions. Now, search as one may one will never find any other motivating force in the activities of the Surrealists than the hope of finding and fixing this point. From this it becomes obvious how absurd it would be to define Surrealism solely as constructive or destructive: the point to which we are referring is 'a fortiori' that point where construction and destruction can no longer be branded one against the other.

(Le Second Manifeste du Surréalisme, 1929)

André Breton's aim to revise our notion of reality by a variety of methods, the most striking of which being psychic automatism, is not Thomas's, insofar as his published aims and his poetry would indicate; and as his work progressed it became more obvious that
his best poems were rooted in what most people would recognize as a conscious reality and that their direction was towards the creation of emotional states arising from, but not revising the conscious experience. A more detailed study of the relationship between Thomas's early poetry and surrealism could reveal many similarities in aim; but the poetry itself reveals no lasting connection with either the idea of automatic writing or the aim of revising our notion of reality. Since the direction of the poetry's development has been towards greater lucidity and since the later poetry is incontrovertibly fashioned by a conscious critical faculty, such a study would be confined to early poems whose staying power is not great and whose intrinsic interest is slight. Certainly, Thomas's denial of all knowledge of surrealism can be ignored and his eventual antipathy towards its methods can be guessed at; the only area of profitable comparison would be in the effects achieved in the use of images. There is, apart from Treece's article and a few passing comments elsewhere, no interest shown by critics in pursuing such a comparison; where surrealism is mentioned at all, it is usually in terms of automatic writing alone. Thomas's style of composition in his first two books undoubtedly bore the marks of surrealism, if apparently random and chaotic imagery is such a mark; it would have been more acceptable had the more eccentric critics expressed their awareness of a certain individuality in Thomas's style in terms of surrealism rather than of their own fanciful theories, for at least there would be common ground on which to meet their ideas.

Parker Tyler's article, "The Poetic Athlete" provides no common ground. It characterizes the most cranky criticism to be found on Thomas and demonstrates that his poetry, having failed to please the
more orthodox palates of the *Sunday Times* readership, succeeds in attracting the worst possible excesses of journalistic pretentiousness. Tyler's attempt to clothe Thomas's poetry in an athletic metaphor is absurd enough, but his efforts to sustain the same metaphor are worse. Just as the Ancient Greeks, he claims, looked to the athletic body as "the reflection of a mental-moral principle", an "organism concretely symbolising the most desirable abstract qualities of mind and morality," so modern poetry is said to display "the specifically verbal transformation of the doctrine of 'moral athlete'": it has an "organic athleticism", an athleticism which is correspondingly moral:

What I am pointing to would be considered by thorough analysis, I think, as the moral self-sufficiency of the instrument of poetry . . . Logically, the objective of the poet with any such organically athletic notion in mind would be the creation of a visible convention, an unmistakeable symbol, of the poetic faculty. The first requirement of this faculty would be that it worked, that it could be demonstrated. Only secondarily would the so-called problem of communication occur. The scientific discovery of the Surrealists was that words could provide this symbol of the Poetic Athlete without deliberately touching on the problem of communication. Before the Surrealists, the Symbolists had automatically realised all the exercises, the gymnasium feats, of the poetic Athlete.68

Presumably Tyler sees a correspondence between admiration for athleticism as shown in athletic feats and admiration for poetic skill as shown in poetic feats; extending the 'mens sana in corpore sano' dictum, poetry which displays feats of virtuosity with words reveals a healthy mind behind it - hence the moral self-sufficiency. The 'athletic' poet somehow is supposed to create a moral structure

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out of his words by making them an "unmistakeable symbol of the poetic faculty," while communication is secondary to the poet's demonstration of a workable poetic faculty.

A poem may approximate to one of two extremes: a verbal statement communicating a definable experience in an attractive form, or a pattern of words whose harmonious shape, sound and structure are pleasing to contemplate, but whose verbal meaning is of minor concern — mainly a matter of giving the opportunity to create the pleasing shape. The more a poem approaches the latter extreme, the less it can involve any aspect of morality. The notion that a beautiful object is a moral one (Keats's "Beauty is truth" fallacy) is untenable; it may induce a sense of moral well-being but cannot itself be moral. Tyler appears to be saying that the 'athleticism' of Thomas's poetry, its 'workability' is somehow a moral condition, which is a fallacy. It is uncertain whether to blame Thomas for writing poetry which encouraged absurdities like this or just to dismiss the criticism as the work of a crank; there can be no doubt of its absurdity:

With what exquisite pleasure we observe in the prize ring the fighter drop his gloved hands at the sound of the gong ending the round, and walking easily with a minimum of effort, return to his corner. This is perhaps the most athletically beautiful moment of the fight, for no dancer combines in his movements a greater economy and ease, or has a more total effect of dignity, than this fighter suddenly warned of the necessity to conserve his remaining energy for the next round. The hooded hands drop like elevators, the panting body walks like a sea on its hind legs. In the same way, the Poetic Athlete conserves himself until the fury of the next poem.

The analogy of a boxing match is not merely ugly in its imagery, but also forms such a ridiculous opening to the argument presenting Thomas as a 'poetic Athlete' that it becomes difficult to treat the article seriously.
Tyler's comments are essentially simple in content, yet confusedly complicated in expression; he remarks that Thomas is not concerned with art in terms of practical ethics or social action but only of what he terms "studio action." All this reduces to is that the poetry tends towards an emphasis on pattern and shape:

I speak of Dylan Thomas because he adequately fulfils my conception of the modern Poetic Athlete. The Poetic Athlete is one who regards his discipline symbolically, that is to say he regards his personal prowess as self-sufficient in so far as it is verbally demonstrable. His social role is to be a symbol. To reinforce this notion of Mr. Thomas, it is necessary only to consider his poetry and what he himself says of it as quoted in Mr. Treece's article already referred to. He speaks of the "conflict" of images within "imposed formal limits." What could such imposed formal limits be but an abstract verbal harmonics, dependent on a purely musical sense of limiting design.

Whatever the attractions of "verbal harmonics" may be, poetry by being formed of words inevitably makes a statement no matter how slight. Concentration on the technical 'action' of poetry leads a critic like Tyler into fanciful realms of untenable theory and away from the subject matter, the experience related or created. His commentary on the content of the poems is vague; the pleasure derived is not from "conceptions of value or by any well-defined emotional prejudices," but he is too concerned with relating the anatomical imagery to the body of his athlete to say anything of its significance to the reader:

Muscular co-ordination, grace of line, adequacy of function, are qualities suggested not only by the organic movement of the words but by the sense of the imagery. With a peculiar inevitability, one thinks of a body - that is to say, one thinks of a complex organism of self-sufficient function, having both a dimensional and qualitative character, when one thinks of Mr. Thomas's poetry. This poetry possesses a sense of completeness, but one which, unfortunately, is symbolic in a less significant sense than is the statue of the discus-thrower.
It is small wonder that Tyler sees such poetry as limited in social relevance; if one pursued his athletic metaphor as far as he does, it would be surprising that it had any relevance at all, even as a source of meaningless pleasure:

I should say that Mr. Thomas and the modern discus-thrower, the athlete of poetry and the athlete of sport, are exactly on a par: each is self-sufficient according to a specialised, profession-admiring audience. Neither is symbolic, today, of a social proficiency, a co-extension of art and action, artistic morality and social morality. For sport, as an art, is as much divorced from society as is poetry; only it is bigger in itself, it attracts a much larger number of skill-loving enthusiasts.

Sport is not, of course, an art, and is an integral part of society; such is the nonsense perpetrated in the name of criticism.

Tyler's article is an outstanding example of a type of criticism which obscures simple issues in a fog of inflated terms and images and renders the unwary at risk of accepting untenable statements.

His evaluation of the 'athletic poet' confirms this:

The Poetic Athlete is shrewder than other kinds of poet; he has, at present, a more accurate notion of the function of the poet, which is to be master of a discipline. The question of publicity, of the magnitude of one's audience, is properly irrelevant to the business of mastering the poetic discipline, of providing the studio workability.

The clear implication is that the poet is concerned with mastering a craft, regardless of audience and communication, that the technique is all. Thomas would hardly have agreed to the irrelevance of audience or publicity since he had his living to make and by his own account he did have experiences and insights to communicate. Thus Tyler's preoccupation with 'shape and shine' cannot be an adequate basis for a proper assessment of Thomas's poetry, quite apart from the absurdity of his terminology; yet there is a truth in his realisation of the importance of the attractiveness of the
poetry's expression:

I do not say that Mr. Thomas's peculiar corruscation, deriving as it does from Surrealism, is the only kind to be admired or to be cultivated. However, as I have tried to point out, its beauty is both peculiar and adequate. It is the kind of verse in which each word is a separate stone on which a light of special shape is played. Only the poet actually sees this shape, but the reader "knows" it is there. And I, personally, would call this "shape" that of functional adequacy.

Poetic appreciation of this order is inevitably vague, and its weakness is its lack of concern for the communication achieved by a poem, even one that is predominantly valuable for the enjoyment of its form and expression. Indistinct references to "light of special shape" playing on stones are hollowly pretentious and hide a failure to consider as of prime importance the poet's ideas, emotions, insight and experience. This article serves as an example of the worst form of eccentric criticism which Thomas's poetry regretably attracted, just as his life-style provoked a perverse delight amongst a largely immature coterie of would-be friends. It and the articles of Treece poorly served the critical situation; it is merely noteworthy that Thomas was gaining so much attention, and unfortunate that he attracted such imprecise and irrelevant criticism.

Where Treece and Tyler are limited in value because of imprecision and eccentricity, the reviews of The Map of Love show a fairly consistent concern for the poetry's status in contemporary verse and for the visionary struggling to break through the still obscure expression of many earlier poems. Interest in status not only shows Thomas's growing reputation but also marks the growth of criticism more involved in measuring reputation than assessing poetry, or concerned with comparing Thomas with his contemporaries -
a task made easier by the publication of an anthology of poetry from *New Verse*. Even where the anthology is not reviewed, most critics are interested in comparative criticism, comparing also Thomas's latest verse with his earlier. He is no longer the startling phenomenon to be lauded or scorned, but more an established young poet who might be classed as a leading figure or as a bad influence. Yet again there is a predominance of comment on the way in which the significance of the poems seems strained by the manner of expression; constantly reviewers are faced with the difficulty of accepting that the satisfaction which can be derived by the reader from the vivid expression of even a slight subject justifies the often obscure and generally difficult imagery. There is, however, growing acceptance that greater discipline was asserting a more organised expression through which the relationship of what is conveyed to the fashioning of a vivid medium in which to convey it was becoming closer:

His imagery, for all its initial strangeness, is the self-consistent idiom of a distinctive vision, and it is organised in patterns of powerful effect. Lines and phrases and rhythms root themselves in the memory; and that, I think, is in itself sufficient testimony that Mr. Thomas is a poet of major importance.69

Hawkins finds some retention of "that stereotyped mating of discordancies" but is convinced of overall improvement. He notes the reputation Thomas enjoyed in playing the part of a "new hope for poetry and a whispered name among the well-informed," and notes a "cloud of imitators," signs of a well-established reputation as a promising young poet, just as other remarks are signs of a reputation as a fraud whose prose and poetry are "sheer rubbish," dif-

69 Desmond Hawkins, "Recent Poetry", *The Spectator*, CLXIII (1939), 300.
ferentiated only because "some of the print is divided into lines, like poetry." This kind of pointless criticism is caused not by uncertainties of response created by a failure to integrate the form and expression of poems with their experiential content, but by a complete failure of the poems to communicate any significance as enjoyment of language to the reader. That this kind of poetry by the very nature of its concentration on verbal patterns and highly (though imprecisely) evocative imagery encourages such a response is not necessarily evidence of a failure by the poet; the overwhelming weight of critical response is towards accepting that there is insight into essential areas of life and an impressive potential for skilful and satisfying form. More typical is the Times Literary Supplement's admiration of the "extraordinary imaginative endowment," but, though accepting that poetry is to be felt and perceived, not merely understood by the "abstract reason," the writer argues that "reason is an element in perception and its logic a necessary ingredient in poetic form," and that there is not enough of it in the poetry: the result is a style sometimes "clotted with the figurative." Whist Thomas's vision is still "excessively subjective," he alludes to some poems in which there is "a greater control of the imaginative abandonment that is both his strength and weakness and in which the splendours of a visionary chaos have begun to cohere as they should." This is the criticism of one who is prepared to listen and use his ability to describe the strengths and weaknesses of the poetry, rather than to dismiss all the writing out of hand, and it combines a feature of the

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70 Reynolds News, August 27, 1939, p.11.

71 "Poet's Fantasies," TLS, August 26, 1939, p.499.
poet's development with a clear statement of the greatest limiting factor of the poetry at this time, a critical hurdle faced by almost every reviewer and critic.

It is faced in the *Listener*, whose reviewer is impressed by the imaginative experience offered by the poetry, but suggests that too often they are "fragmentary outpourings from what might well seem an endless subconscious stream," with the result that the 'occasion' of the poem is often lost, "submerged under a tide of fine words and phrases." The best of the poems ("In memory of Ann Jones" in particular) are said to be those in which the 'occasion' is straightforward and clear. This is once more the demand for the 'contexts' to be clear in order that the images of the poems can operate meaningfully and for a refining of the imagery; but it is a less stringent demand than is often made. Patrick Redmond, in the *Tribune* writes that Thomas "has not yet dragged himself from the slough of tangled mysticism to the 'terra firma' of more or less straightforward statement." Redmond is careful to distinguish Thomas from his contemporaries by speaking of the "introspective obscurity" of writers who, under Eliot's influence, were breaking away from the "literary artifices of the Georgian period." He is certain that "the best of the bunch" have emerged from such obscurity and that their work is now "enriched with a social content and a modern simplicity." Redmond separates Thomas from such a trend in contemporary poetry by suggesting that he had become stuck in a form of writing out of which other poets had emerged, but does not distinguish

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72 *The Listener*, October 19, 1939, p. 780.

between the causes of obscurity, thus leaving the impression that Thomas's and Auden's obscurity were of the same kind, an impression later adequately dispelled by Stephen Spender.

The reviewers were by this time trying to make the poetry fit some kind of pattern, but found difficulty because it was so individual in manner and would not fit adequately into the fashion of the time (being only on the verge of influencing the fashion), and because the uneasy relationship between form and content so readily pushed the critics' thinking towards denial of any value in the poetry because it seemed remarkably complex for all the rational sense it conveyed or towards an undue enthusiasm for its verbal splendours regardless of their relationship to any emotional or intellectual significance. By accepting the limitation of the poetry's appeal, Davies Aberpennar indicates how a balance can be achieved; it requires acceptance of an "almost (not quite) pure aestheticism of imagery and word," and the enjoyment of the "movement of the sensuous imagination built around a slight intellectual theme in associations of colour and sight and sound." 74 Aestheticism was not, of course, particularly fashionable, but there is good sense in what is said about its appeal because the whole comment is qualified by acceptance of its limited value and limited audience:

Much modern verse, there is scarcely need to say, is a dreary agony of cultivated obscurity and laboured pretentiousness; but those charges seem to me as irrelevant to Mr. Thomas's craft as some of the vague eulogies that have been lavished on it. He is no more capable of perpetrating "literary swindles" than of producing "immortal sonnets." If you wish to understand his real poetic gifts examine the poem beginning "It is the

\textit{sinners' dust-tongued bell} and observe how the initial reflection (that diabolical time, the marriage of flesh and spirit, brings into being the urchin grief) has been surrounded by a luxurious array of images and symbols evolved from the ideas of marriage, church, devil, death, time and tide. Poetry to Dylan Thomas, so far, has been predominantly a developed compound of the law-breaking imaginings of the child, the madman, the lover and the dreamer. A not dissimilar "theory of poetry" used to be a critical commonplace; now, in the guise of surrealism, it is something of a critical heresy. But it has never before been practised more thoroughly, and therefore more originally, than by Dylan Thomas.

However restrained such criticism may be, it is yet another attempt to find a satisfactory formula for poetry that exhibits too much variation for too slick a definition. It is pointless generalising about poetry which contains puzzling obscurity and the transparent beauty, yet a critic who acknowledges the variety is too easily reduced to indecisive criticism.

Charles Fisher's review contrasts passages of baffling obscurity with lines of dear meaning, emphasising the incompatibility of lines which offer clues to significance as in a crossword puzzle with lines of literal meaning (as in "The spire cranes"), but insisting that one must be prepared to work on a poem:

\begin{quote}
The conspiracy to deprive English words suddenly of their meaning because Dylan Thomas wrote them has become a literary fashion. Few will take the trouble to think about poetry nowadays while there is a cinema open.\footnote{Charles Fisher, "Dylan Thomas's New Book 'Map of Love'," \textit{South Wales Evening Post}, August 26, 1939, p.4.}
\end{quote}

He does not wholly accept the publisher's claim that the poems show a "considerable advance out of past obscurity into a new clearness of vision and expression," which in itself is another over-simplification. While acknowledging about ten poems, which "should be clear to the dullest, least imaginative man who was ever told to open an anthology,"
poems which are of "such indisputable genius that they will long outlive the memory of their author's fashionable detractors," Fisher devotes more attention to the possible causes of obscurity. As an aid to understanding he quotes from a letter from Thomas which says that the poetry should be "heavy in tare though nimble," and that it "should be both organic and orgiastic, dividing and unifying, personal but not private, propagating the individual in the mass, and the mass in the individual," working from words not towards them. He merely presents these comments for our consideration, without pursuing the important implication of a poet's working from words, that is of allowing the words to spring from the emotional situation and to create the significance rather than to seek words to express most vividly a known significance. His hopefulness that by reading a poem and waiting, "the truth in it will emerge," is presumably based on the idea of a poem working 'from words', and raises the uncertainty voiced elsewhere of "whether these Romeo and Juliet beauties and horrors are capable of becoming the thing happening." Although this was said of the prose, it is an apt comment on the poems and the confusion created when "the phrases tumble over themselves under the loud wind of those vivid sensualities."

Such confusion was sometimes regarded as a deliberate exploitation of an uncritical public:

Dylan's trouble is a simple one. Anyone who wishes to entrench himself in the public's fancy has first to patent a little manner. But also anyone who once becomes celebrated for a little manner will find it very difficult to escape being committed to it for life. Dylan invented an idiom, consisting of a few tricks of verbal and metaphorical violence, like an infectiously

76 Charles Williams, Life and Letters, XXIII, 237.
engaging lisp or stutter, as found in the repertoire of a successful social clown. Dylan became trapped in this mechanism, it seems, and now many besides Dylan are slaves of these easily mastered tricks.77

His impression of trickery makes his criticism relevant only to the idea of an isolation of manner and the discussion of manner from the poetry's meaningfulness; but this, of course, may be the fault of the poetry. The problem is that the poems can seem to operate on a level of verbal activity that involves complexity and a violent distortion of linguistic relationships without adequate recompense in terms of meaning or satisfaction in vividness of observation and expression. Hence, only a vague sense of meaningfulness exists where the poem is inadequately grounded in a stimulating situation and therefore dependent upon an artificial 'energy' to sustain its impressiveness. It is less that a poem conveys nothing and more that what it does convey can be too far removed from a situation that is recognizably the focal point of image development and ultimately the area of experience observed and appreciated by the poet. The inadequacy of the reference in poems to a thought or emotion that is the core of the experience is criticised in the Manchester Guardian where we have an unequivocal demand for communication:

Mr. Thomas's imagery is as abundant and as creatively imaginative as ever and as unorganised and uncontrolled, and his language is as original and as strongly concretely English as ever. But until he has mastered the use of imagery and language as instruments of communication he will remain a poet remote.78

The failure of some poems to offer adequate clues to the context of the situation is attributed partly to the absence of titles, or to


78 Charles Powell, "Verse," Manchester Guardian, September 8, 1939, p.3.
the unhelpfulness of those there are; the fairness of his criticism is qualified, however, by the relatively small part a title need play. Far more striking is the failure in such poems to use a linguistic register that adequately helps to distinguish the subject-matter, a failure often attributed to poor organisation:

The sixteen brief poems . . . contain many a poetic phrase, many a musical line; but language is put upon the rack, and only in one piece ("We lying by seasand . . . .") can this reviewer find the impulse to organise the whole into beauty or the coherence even of a dream.79

or more devastatingly attributed to a totally chaotic and fragmented imagination:

Suppose a remarkable urchin turned out the dirty lining of his magic pocket, in which he had casually collected the pubic hairs of a lion . . . two inches out of an indecent masterpiece by Fuselin, some recollections from Webster, a couple of Leidaces (glass alleys) and a comet, two or three stumps of coloured chalk, a tooth, some screwed-up counterfoils from sixpenny postal-orders, nail-parings, a sucked out tin of condensed milk, a pill-box of maggots and one of Joanna Southcott's chests. Suppose this pile were divided into 'merzbild' poems and short stories - there would be 'The Map of Love'. . . .80

There is no answer to such criticism, nor is it anymore capable of development than opposing claims, uncritically stated, of Herbert Read. Although remarks such as, "These poems cannot be reviewed; they can only be acclaimed," and "the most absolute poetry that has been written in our time," may have been flattering to a poet of only twenty-four, they rightly aroused opposition in other critics.81

Such comments aroused opposition to Thomas's poetry which the poetry itself did not deserve because it is almost inevitable that such

80 Geoffrey Grigson, Horizon, I (1940), 58.
exaggerated praise is met by destructive criticism aimed at the critic not the poetry.

Read's style of reviewing, or rather acclaiming, is as much a disservice to Thomas as the crankiness of a Tyler's athleticism. Although the poetry is 'absolute', it apparently had had its failings, such as a "surfeit of imagery that dulled the reader's appetite," and had since developed a stronger diction, greater rhythmic variety and greater accessibility in some poems. The vagueness of the term 'absolute' means Read does not need to tackle the puzzle of the mixture of accessible and inaccessible poems; the mixture need only be stated as a fact, without apparent significance:

Some of the poems will need a dozen readings before they yield their meaning or intention; others are comparatively simple, tempered to pathos, humble before the elemental tragedy of life.

Such is the nature of his criticism; nothing need be examined closely or subjected to a discriminating judgement, for all that is required is a statement of the poetry's supposed value and an evasion of a critic's responsibility to use meaningful terms in his evaluation:

The 'Map of Love' is a unique book. I do not wish to qualify the achievement of it in any way. It contains the most absolute poetry that has been written in our time, and one can only pray that this poet will not be forced in any way to surrender the subtle course of his genius.

Praise like this is no more valuable than Grigson's impatient dismissal, and makes an odd bedfellow to the opinion that the poems only appeal to those who enjoy injecting meaning into poems. There is a curious sense of criticism that feeds on criticism, of a sterile opposition of extreme responses with moderate comments in between revealing inability to resolve the poetry into a neat formula.
Where critics cannot adequately come to terms with the faults and divergences in the poetry, there is little more success in establishing Thomas's relationship with his contemporaries. It is an important critical exercise, but is narrowed in scope by the predominant comparisons between The Map of Love and New Verse, although references are made beyond the latter volume. The situation could be dramatized as a "battleground" of warring traditional and revolutionary factions, with Thomas's obscurity devolving from a "mistaken devotion to the doctrines of surrealism - to a fashionable intellectual pose."  

More accurately the Listener distinguishes between Eliot, Auden and "his followers" whose poetry is largely intellectual and whose obscurity is caused by having "complicated processes of thought to express which they cannot make easy," and Thomas:

He is a bard, he has no university education, he does not think intellectually, he expresses elemental passions and extreme conditions of human existence, birth, death, despair, violence, in an enlarged and primitive Welsh landscape. His obscurity cannot be puzzled out; it is the darkness of drunken rhetoric. He is a unique poet, and at the age of 24 he had succeeded in creating a rhetorical language of great power, which is impassioned, austere, and serious.  

The classifying of Thomas in this way clearly separates him from his contemporaries as a unique, tempestuous bard who is, above all, an entertainer.

Clifford Dyment endorses such a view of Thomas's isolation as a 'different' poet, the exception to the rule that modern poetry was moving towards increasing clarity of expression:

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A good many people fight shy of contemporary poetry, and the reason they give is that it is incomprehensible. Yet, reading an anthology such as Mr. Grigson's one realises very forcibly how unwarranted that charge now is. Ever since W. H. Auden and Cecil Day Lewis discovered that retreating into the tortuous caverns of the subconscious was no way in which to set about curing the world's ills, the message of modern poetry has been getting clearer and clearer. That message may not have been a comfortable one, but the situation in Europe today proves that the uneasy things they saw and wrote about were not merely the delusions of reformative zeal.  

Yet Dyment is not taken with Grigson's insistence on materialism and objectivity, and thus not impressed by poetry which is too much of its own age and is "lacking in perspicacity" sufficiently to "assist in this betrayal of the human spirit" through the twin evils of materialism and objectivity. He quotes from Day Lewis to illustrate the kind of verse which he considers to be good, and it can be compared in tone and texture with Thomas's, for the contrast is considerable and does not escape Dyment:

Yet living here,
As one between two massing powers I live
Whom neutrality cannot save
Nor occupation cheer.
None such shall be left alive;
The innocent wing is soon shot down
And private stars fade in the blood-red dawn
Where two worlds strive.

He is clearly right that these lines are greatly different from poetry "rich in image and metaphor, sometimes dark as a storm, sometimes as gentle as April sunlight," but he does not find in Day Lewis the same "virtuosity in syllabic jugglery that spoils some of Thomas's poems." The contemplative tone of Day Lewis's lines with its certainty of manner and syntax certainly contrasts strongly with

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the vigorous and noisy exuberance of lines such as these from The Map of Love:

On no work of words now for three lean months in the bloody Belly of the rich year and the big purse of my body
I bitterly take to task my poverty and craft:

To take to give is all, return what is hungrily given
Puffing the pounds of manna up through the dew to heaven
The lovely gift of the gab bangs back on a blind shaft, with all its rich explosive sounds and inflated diction. Dyment prefers the social and political context of Bay Lewis's and George Barker's poems hence his preference for "The hand that signed the paper" - "one of the most noble and moving poems yet produced by any of the younger poets," but arguably one of the least typical of Thomas's style.

The more striking qualities of other poems encouraged Edwin Muir to distinguish Thomas as a poet whose "direct vision" clearly shows that he is "in the world of his imagination, whether he knows his way about there, or we understand him, or not." The contrast is with "the vast majority of the poets of his generation" who are on the "bare uncomfortable edge" of the world of the imagination, "arguing firmly with the customs officers." To get in, says Muir, the poet requires an "attitude at once moral and diplomatic," the poet who is already in requires one more urgently - and Thomas does not have one that is easy to find. There are affinities with his own poetry, although it is certainly easier to detect a more moral attitude in his than in Thomas's. Muir echoes the familiar complaint that Thomas lets "inspiration pour upon him from every quarter until he is submerged," but adds that he has a "visionary imagination" and a

"very striking sense of style and metrical form" which was noticeable in *Eighteen Poems* but which is now "developed and refined almost beyond recognition." Recognising Hopkins's influence, Muir continues by remarking upon another development, away from preoccupation with the body, but believes that he still lacks the "rational comprehensibility which is the final triumph of the imagination." He sets Thomas and Barker aside from MacNeice, Auden and Spender, but will not accept Grigson's demand for a "scientific, or common-sense view of poetry," mainly because it would exclude Thomas and Barker.

It is understandable that a poet like Edwin Muir should appreciate the visionary and imaginative powers of Thomas, and as a poet whose own work is not above obscurity that he should be prepared to accept such difficulty; but there is a persistent demand for greater clarity and a frequent approbation for it when it is evident - apart from the odd instance of a reviewer who contrasts the "complex violence" of *The Map of Love* with the "lovely simplicities of his early work," and another who inaccurately related Thomas's esoteric style to the "current idiom." The esoteric idiom is more interestingly described by Cyril Connolly as a continuation of earlier technique without its "spontaneous rush of inspiration,"

Although he too objects to Grigson's desire for "reporter-poets," and finds Thomas anything other than a reporter, he is dissatisfied with what he believes to be fraudulent writing:

His being a purely Celtic writer makes his forgeries difficult to detect, but I think one can say that many of his images are nonsense, and that his hit-or-miss method is unsatisfactory, while his writing is inflated and faked.

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86 Iris Conlay, "They Bestride their Harrow World," *Catholic Herald*, September 1, 1939, p.4.

87 *Birmingham Post*, September 26, 1939.
and considers that Thomas's talent will only be realised when the poet departs from his current style:

If he goes on writing poetry long enough to become disgusted with his own facility, and to dislike the smell of rhetoric and violence, or his hare and tortoise race with George Barker, he might give us as good as Hopkins or Smart.

He risks possible contradiction in preferring Thomas's potential to the 'reporter' style of Auden and MacNeice:

... the arts are not receptacles to reporting, they are expressions of the highest and deepest qualities of man, examples of supreme technique which are apart from the welter of journalism in which we live; the poetry we need must be great poetry, not an affable verbal news-reel.

Because Auden and MacNeice are excellent journalists much of their verse, with its flat and topical vocabulary, and slick contemporary thought is impermanent, as transitory as the effusion of any ego-bound Sunday columnist.

Connolly considers that Auden at his best has the genius and "deep moral swoop of a great poet" and that MacNeice writes excellent lyrical verse in the best traditions of the Greek writers of elegies, but he is less definite about what he finds so good in these "flashes" in Thomas's writing: the best we have is his opinion that "The early verse ... had genius, one detected a dazzling and spontaneous rush of inspiration about the discoveries about beauty and sex which the young author made."

Any poet ought, of course, to do more than report, and Auden and MacNeice certainly do, but the flatness of tone and earnest social consciousness associated with the poetry of the time vividly illustrate the striking features of Thomas's verse, even if too often these features lead to bewilderment:
But taking them as a whole, the last word that can be said in his favour as a poet, are his poems. They baffle. They are every one devoid of integral meaning and the lines and images are irritatingly inconsequential. Emotions and emotional states are dissipated as quickly as they are evoked. Reading the poems you conclude that you are an awful "sejit" quite incapable of appreciating the latest marvellous achievements, or that you possess a higher degree of intelligence than you thought you possessed.88

The review is scathing about the praise awarded to Thomas ("the kind of praise that would be accorded a genius, sprung singing and fully equipped from the cradle by the Muses"), and can only point to isolated features of merit:

He can, for example, hit off amazingly apt images and he can play with words as a conjuror can with eggs. When he likes, which is not very often, he can stir the heart with stray lines of high music.

The considerable confusion of the critical response of this period is aptly summed up here in a comment on the stories as "symbolising something that Mr. Dylan Thomas has resolved to keep as a private matter between himself and God Almighty," in which remark is the understandable exasperation of critics who have encountered so much difficulty and yet who recognize real talent struggling to break through.

It might have been hoped that the response to Thomas's poetry in the United States would, on the publication of The World Breathe, have produced some fresh criticism; but although there are some useful articles, the issues raised are familiarly centred on the nature and causes of obscurity and the relationship between content and form. Julian Symons distinguishes between obscurity of manner and matter and, contrasting Meredith, Swinburne and Thomas, states an obvious truth:

The obscurity of matter predominates over the obscurity of manner. Wherever obscurity of matter and manner are found together in a poem, obscurity of matter must always predominate; for obscurity of matter is a revelation in poetic terms of obscurity in the writer's mind, while obscurity of manner is often consciously imposed.9

Obscurity of manner is illustrated by Swinburne's "In the Bay":

Swinburne's obscurity seems designed to conceal what he has to say... the imprecision of his adjectives accords with the imprecision of all his phrasing and because his imprecise phrases are indisputably the right phrases for his imprecise thoughts and feelings. "Obscure" may seem an odd word for Swinburne's verse; but poetic phrases which have no literal meaning may justifiably be called obscure. It is an obscurity of manner of this kind, an endeavour to conceal what is in fact very simple matter, though its writer may intend it to be very profound matter that I find in Dylan Thomas.

The basis of Symons's approach is his demand for literal meaning, for clarity "in regard to the total literal meaning of the poem," and he does not find it in Thomas's obscure poems. He believes that to paraphrase a poem would not achieve a clearer understanding, and that the kind of criticism which offers various readings for a difficult line is suspect:

Many fantastic explanations of the lines are possible. There are (as with Swinburne) too many meanings: there is an appearance of exactness, but no exactness in the poet's mind: a great deal is intimated, but very little said.

He refers to the ten sonnets as most revealing of Thomas's worst style, full of Biblical terms, Americanisms and personal terms mixed up in a "brew of very doubtful taste," and to other poems as "jokes, rhetorical intellectual fakes of the highest class." A lack of story or continuity is also blamed for the weakness of poems such as

"Why east wind chills":

I have no hesitation here in saying that the extract, and the whole poem, have no particular meaning at all; the poem is "about" a child's questioning of (literally) some of the facts of life . . . that is, it is about not very much. Many other good poems are restatements of equally familiar questions: but the reader will not be much nearer understanding the poem fully when its "subject" has been explained to him. Mr. Thomas's poem has a "subject" but no story, no continuity; it does not proceed from one point to another, but is a complete whole which must be swallowed or rejected.

Such poems, then, are merely rhetorical repetitions of whatever is stated in the first verse; without any narrative progression:

Considered carefully, his matter is seen to be abstract general statements; and usually the statement is made in the first verse of the poem (or the opening passage of the piece of prose) and repeated with variations in the other verses.

Although Thomas had declared the need for a narrative line, it is certain that Symons is pointing to a characteristic of many of the poems; it is less certain whether it is a weakness, but the article continues with an accurate consideration of the conflict of surface and meaning, the obscuring of simple meaning by an artificially generated complexity of expression:

His poems are certainly obscure; and their obscurity is not one of matter - he could write as simply as Mr. W. H. Davies and say just the same things. It is an obscurity of manner that we have to deal with: the use of extended metaphors, private adjectives and sexual symbols, to conceal a simple meaning. And this obscurity of language is not always relevant to his poem's subjects; it is very often imposed from outside.

Symons pursues the distinction between obscurity of matter and manner by relating the former to a "personal maladjustment" of the poet in relation to society and the latter to an evasion of an indirect maladjustment recognized by the poet:
An obscurity of matter (Donne or Hopkins) is the result of a directly personal maladjustment, probably not recognised as anything to do with "society": an obscurity of manner is caused usually by some indirect maladjustment which the poet recognises and evades.

The maladjustment which Thomas shows is an unease at the simplicity of his subject matter, a simplicity which he attempts to hide:

I have stated that Mr. Thomas' is an obscurity of manner, and I would state further (as I have already implied) that this obscurity has been imposed on his poems, half-consciously and half-unconsciously, to conceal their real simple subjects.

Although he acknowledges that all poems in a sense have simple subjects, Symons seeks a significance and relevance outside itself in poetry and does not find it in the work of Joyce, Gertrude Stein or Laura Riding; he will admit of no compromise between the Coleridgean view that the artist seeks an absolute truth that can communicate certainties and the Marxist view of art "as part of the super-structure of society":

There is no tenable third view, different in kind from these two. The theory that "Art" should be practised for "Art's sake" is a nihilistic solipsism, an emasculated version of Coleridge's view, which proclaims that the "somewhat that is" is ART: the view is solipsistic because if "Art" represents an absolute, no position exists from which Art itself may be judged—any kind of nonsense may be palmed off as a masterpiece, and since it cannot be judged except by "artistic" standards (by standards contained within itself, in other words) it cannot be judged at all. James Joyce, Gertrude Stein and Laura Riding show "Art for Art's sake" in practice today. I do not mean that these writers would give lip-service to the doctrine agreed to by the Nineties' poets (they are much too wary to do that); but their practice is to write words for the sake of words, for the sake of an intangible and unattainable purity which has the most slender relation to life... I do not say that these writers are poor writers: I think (judging by my outside standards, which are not their standards) that Miss Riding and Mr. Joyce are good writers: I wish to point out that their attitude is weak and vicious, and that it weakens and makes vicious their art. A work of art should have some implications outside itself, implications founded on a philosophical or moral system (the liberal, humanist attitude I regard as a feeble child of the Marxist view).
Thomas is regarded as a poet whose work falls between the two kinds and who would do well to subscribe to one as other dogmas. His poetry is said to be weak because of the limitations of his subject matter and the way in which he attempts to disguise the simplicity from himself and others:

What is said is Mr. Thomas' poems is that the seasons change; that we decrease in vigour as we grow older; that life has no obvious meaning; that love dies. His poems mean no more than that. They mean too little. Their subject matter is as narrow as that of Housman, and the vigour with which this subject-matter is treated is not always appropriate; though his poems are composed with great technical skill. Mr. Thomas' confusion (the cause of his obscurity) is this: he realises that he will remain a poet of very limited virtues while he remains in his present (Art for Art's sake) position; he tries to hide this fact from himself and other people by putting on a wonderful surface polish on his poems, which is not quite relevant to them, and which does not express simply his simple thoughts. He is unable to adhere to a "somewhat which is, simply because it is!" and he is unwilling to regard poetry (or his poetry) as merely a part of the social process. If he is able to accept one or other of these dogmas much of his obscurity will disappear; though it would be dangerous to prophesy that he will be a better poet.

His criticism is based on the belief that Thomas's work is fraudulent, that he has deliberately (if unconsciously) given a high polish to a simple creation, but this is only fair where the "polish" offers no satisfaction, because it fails to convey that the simple subject is important to the poet and should seem important to us; it is not fair if it is, in his words, "a wonderful surface polish," for that infers that it enhances the value of the simple theme. By ending with a claim that he is not attacking Thomas, and an admission that he is not referring to the poetry's "final value," he finally weakens his unsatisfactory stance. Since it is arguable that the poetry's "final value" must include as in Hopkins, the value of the very shaping of the language in the process of observing, ordering and
rendering significant his experience.

The value of enhancing through language the simplicity of themes is recognised by John Berryman, also in the Kenyon Review; he indicates the importance of the recurring words whose meanings become known:

Here are some of the key words: blood, sea, dry, ghost, grave, straw, worm, double, crooked, salt, cancer, tower, shape, fork, marble; and the more usual death, light, time, sun, night, wind, love, grief. Each of these appears many times and has regularly one or several symbolic values.90

He also draws our attention to unusual epithets like the "moon-drawn grave," to compound words like "firewind," "marrow-root," and so on, and to "old, new, obsolete coined and colloquial words such as 'scut,' 'fibs,' and 'hank.'" Colours, he explains are frequent but meaningful, green signifying origin, innocence, while red is significant of experience and violence (he would be more accurate to relate green to youthfulness - only indirectly a matter of origin and innocence).

He also mentions numerical diction (in the many images of halving, doubling and quartering), Biblical language, though these are not seen as the most important aspects of the diction:

The principal sources of imagery are the sea and sex. In ten poems the dominant imagery is marine, and marine imagery occurs incidentally in twenty-four others. A host of terms show the sexual emphasis: sucking, kiss, loin, rubbing, naked . . . metaphors extend the reach and importance of this area. All these words, and stranger others, meet violently to form a texture impressive and exciting. One has the sense of words set at an angle, language seen freshly, a new language.

Berryman sensibly allows the vital function of the ordering of words in creating a poetic statement that makes an impact which may well be

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90 John Berryman, Kenyon Review, II, 481.
out of strict proportion to the simplicity of the theme. The importance of the impact caused by the energy devoted to technique can hardly be underestimated, and has the notable effect, according to Berryman, that Thomas "faces in a lesser degree than most poets the problems of a given subject," which could be a different way of saying that Thomas evades the implications of simple subject-matter, but if it is a poet's aim to express most vividly the simplest of experiences, it is no real criticism that his experience is simple. But the "image relations" of which Berryman writes are dependent upon words whose meanings cannot be avoided because of techniques:

Alliteration, internal rhyme, refrain and repetition, puns, continuous and complicated tropes are some of the devices. He works usually in rigid stanzas, six-line in the earlier poems, the lines of equal length; recently he has used very elaborate stanzas and varied the line lengths. The metrical development is from iambic to manipulative, spondees and anapaests; in the short line poems especially, the movement is expert.

Structure is but an aid to poetic statement and images relate to one another by meaningful association; in the end the subject, simple or complex, has to be conveyed, and there are basic difficulties in reaching Thomas's 'simple' themes:

The difficulty has various causes, some of them being distortion or inadequacy of syntax ... compounding of negatives, mixing of figures, the occasionally continuous novelty of expression and relation, employment of high-pitched rhetoric ... and the use of subjects of nightmare and fantasy. Personification is so frequent and is accomplished with so little ceremony that the reference of personal pronouns is now and then erratic; in general, the practice with pronouns and antecedents is careless.

Berryman's assessment is that despite inadequately defined contexts and sideways progressions,
the whole matter can be, and by most of Thomas's critics has been exaggerated. At least fifteen poems, more than one third of those in the book, present no substantial difficulty to a conscientious reader; some present no difficulty at all. Of the rest, perhaps eight are largely insoluble or only provisionally soluble. This is not a large number, and it is simply the price one pays for what is valuable and cannot be got elsewhere.

Despite the value, he reflects the attitude that there can be little further exploitation of such a style:

Thomas's verse does not show the major signs, such as powerful dramatic sense, wide interests, a flexible and appropriate diction, skill over a broad range of subjects, that are clear in the work of his American contemporary Delmore Schwartz and point confidently to the future. Any large development is probably not to be expected.

At best, Thomas has, in a dozen or so poems, "extended the use of language and to a lesser degree the methods of lyric poetry."

There are many ways in which Thomas's style of poeticising has been described, most of them leading to the proposition that if the poetry has any value it lies in the manner of expression of a few elemental themes; this leads to a definition of it as "decadent," according to Huysmans' statement that decadent art "depreciates the importance of the whole for the benefit of its parts, and strives after the virtues of individualism." Rosenfeld argues that the "'whole' of poetry, the integrity of emotive and intuitive meanings, no longer or only very partially exists", because Thomas's verses only "vaguely represent an interior world", and in some cases "appear to be mystic symbols of the present stages of the cosmic life." The poet is indifferent to intuitive meanings, being more concerned with emotive meanings:

91 Paul Rosenfeld, "Decadence and Dylan Thomas," Nation, CL (March 23, 1940), 399.
Again and again drunkenly he has sacrificed his "criticism of life" to the splendours of form, sonority, sensuous effect, and yet, Rosenfeld concedes that these splendours do have a value of their own:

The verses are verbal scores. Oftentimes wry, the sounds lead an amusing life of their own and generate each other. The movement frequently recaptures an eighteenth century vigour and stateliness . . . Entire stanzas of his chant wonderfully:

Some let me make you of the vowelled beeches,  
Some of the oaken voices, from the roots  
Of many a thorny shire tell you the notes,  
Some let me make you of the water's speeches.

The flow and singular, not infrequently powerful images is steady. The circumstance that well-nigh every line is a unique image, a minute poem, intensifies the taut rhythmicality.

The good sense of the review is lost when Rosenfeld examines the political implications of 'decadent' verse, basing his comments on the notion of the poetry's being a protest against "the Auden and Spenders and their McNephews and MaNeices:"

The chief importance of this suggestion lies, however, in its reference of ourselves to the possible social significance of this decadent literature with its accentuation of the life of an individual part, at the expense of the totality. One of the questions it raises is whether the object against which this poetry may be thought to protest may not be less Auden and company than the collectivism they espoused. Its characteristics certainly give it the appearance of an individualistic protest.

Even more strange are his remarks on possible political affiliations:

Another question is whether that protest may not have its lever in something far transcending the individual, Dylan Thomas. Let no-one consider them irrelevant. Thomas is said to be very much "in" with the Welsh nationalists. Just before the war broke out he was expected to edit a paper of Welsh cultural nationalism. And art has long been among the shadows cast before them by coming evolution and events.
Thomas's political innocence is well-established and his poetry is strikingly non-political for the decade in which it was first published; the difficulty of following Rosenfeld's argument, together with the inappropriateness of it to the poetry itself makes this development in his article unproductive.

Rosenfeld's discussion of how subject-matter is elaborated is taken up in the Southern Review in which the writer not only accepts the value of such elaboration but foreshadows the exegetical approach which seeks to interpret the minutia of the elaborations. His discussion is based on the poetry for "a special habit of reading" because his language has a "structure that we are no longer prepared for": we are not to look for a logical or chronological structure because:

Thomas seems to work by a habit of language, more common with the Elizabethans than with us, which might be called intensive description; the lines do not progressively explain or define, nor do they work through a single symbolism; instead, each line, or a whole group of lines, takes another whack at describing, or perhaps invoking would be the better term, the central notion of the poem as a whole. 92

A "perpetual excitement of his language . . . is justified by its fertile elaboration of the theme" (it is not clear why this method is necessarily illogical), and the poetic method is justified by a vague speculation on its value:

What does one get by alternative description that one does not get by a simple lucid statement of the theme? I should say a notion of its scope and intensity. How can one excuse a form where there is no logical reason for not altering indiscriminately the poet's order for his lines? I should retire into the confusion of

92 Andrews Wanning, "Criticism and Principles: Poetry of the Quarter," Southern Review, VI (Spring 1941), 792. (WIB is reviewed on p.806.)
musical theory and urge that there is the same excuse, and no doubt the same reason for a particular order, that there is for the Theme and Variations. Is it true surrealism? I should be sure it is not; the images are violent but not unconscious.

By being finally led to accepting this one need not get annoyed by confusion if the poetry gives pleasure. He enjoys the poetry; he thinks he knows why; but he is unconcerned whether his reasons make sense. Here is the danger of easy acceptance of a supposed value in the magnificence of a poet's manner without adequate examination of the values contained in the experience of a poem. In the place of other critical values we have a tenuous notion of musicality and an unsatisfactory appeal to enjoyment as an ultimate authority. It is a peculiar quality of Thomas's verse that it has encouraged eccentricity, crankiness and a glorification of the superficial excitement of startling images; but the worst influence is towards a flaccid criticism which accepts all excitement as good whether an integral feature of the poetry or not, and which indulgently praises novelty as if a virtue. Not all criticism of The Map of Love, however, is of this kind.

Although obscurity remains the most predominant critical issue in the reviews of The Map of Love, there is also some indication of the effect Thomas's verse was presumed to be having on other poets. That Thomas's poetry is an isolated phenomenon is an over-simplified truth, but the matter of his influence on modern poetry will not be pursued here, because whether successfully copied or not, the poetry as it stands is of immediate importance. Of more interest is the evidence of the development of such uncritical adulation as Herbert Read's which resorts to empty rhetorical gestures such as that the
verse constitutes "the most absolute poetry of our time." Many reviews are in the end unsatisfactory because they are largely negative in their approach; from Read's "he does not hang over gates admiring daffodils and sheep" to the rejection of Grigson's attitudes something is said about what Thomas's poetry is not, but not enough explanation is given about what it is. At worst, although it is established that he is no Auden, Spender, MacNeice or Lewis, the impression is left that Thomas is a poetic freak whose excesses are either to be condemned as fraudulent or praised for their fiery bardic vision. At best, the criticism wrestles with the poet's idiom and attempts to come to terms with its difficulties and to define the true nature and implications of the obscurity in a constructive way. Yet the very nature of the problem makes it difficult for the critic to commit himself to a judgement of Thomas's contemporary importance or of his likely future status. He recognizes undoubted talent of a particularly rhetorical kind, but qualifies his attitude because of a frequent lack of care over communication, of a pyrotechnical display of verbal skill which often hinders the transference of meaning and fails to provide integrated and purposeful ornamentation. Much of the criticism is therefore concentrated on this obstruction of the flow of meaningful poetry and on the future development away from wilful indulgence in excesses that is generally held to be essential for further poetic development.

There is no justification for the critical position from which it is argued that the poetry is rubbish, consisting of prose divided into lines, for it is merely destructive, but there is reason behind the suggestion that there is a lack of conscious direction of the imagination at times, though it must be qualified with acknowledgement
that an increasing clarity is being shown. Many reviews deal with either the sources of the imagery or the techniques of presentation, so that we read that images well up from a subconscious stream (The Listener), or that they are based on themes which are essentially very simple (Kenyon Review), and at the same time that there is a lack of adequate reason in an expression clotted with metaphor and rhetoric (TLS and Life and Letters); or that the poet indulges in juggling with words in a poetry that is essentially inflated and fake (Cyril Connolly, New Statesman and Nation). If anything, the preponderance of comments are on the texture of the verse and the general feeling is that the surface of one of these poems is so liberally ornamented with technical devices that ornamentation obstructs the possible value of the statement, the extreme of which view being that the poetry is full of tricks and devices, and is mainly a fraud.

Symons's identification of Thomas's obscurity as an obscurity of manner sets a demand that poetry must both have something to say and a way of saying it which is fully integrated in all its aspects. In describing the style as obstructive rather than generative of meaning, he isolates a characteristic of the verse - the habit of imposing mannerisms from outside the poem which obscure the simplicity of the underlying theme, even though his description of the themes is over simplified:

What is said in Mr. Thomas' poems is that the seasons change; that we decrease in vigour as we grow older; that life has no obvious meaning; that love dies. His poems mean no more than that.

His article serves as a useful statement of the demand for logical clarity of statement and for the functional nature of all techniques and embellishments, but it does not make adequate allowance for the
variableness of the poetry, for the poems which "present no substantial difficulty to a conscientious reader" (John Berryman), nor for the valid point that the reader can justifiably be expected to work at a poem (Charles Fisher). There were sufficient clear poems by 1939, poems which yield adequate meaning at a first reading to allow the reader, not so much to 'puzzle out' the rest, as to recreate the poetic statement by working constructively with the poem in an active process of reading.

It is less a change of subject matter which is responsible for the comparative clarity of some poems, and only indirectly an alteration in technique; since the main causes of obscurity are a disintegration of parts of a poem, the imposition of superficial flashes of virtuosity and a general failure to establish a basis for communication, there is a general improvement when a poem is given direction and fusion. Increasingly, the necessary integrating force is the result of a shift in the relationship between the poet and his subject matter and between the poet and his audience, which occurs when there is a sense of 'occasion' or a concern with a subject beyond the immediate preoccupations of the poet with himself. The nature of the occasion or the concern varies from poem to poem, but the effect is commonly to cause Thomas to write slightly more objectively even of himself. Although many of the themes of the Map of Love are familiar, there is greater variety than in the previous volumes. Time and death continue to be major preoccupations and "Twenty-four years" shows how they are treated now. There is a familiar equating of birth in terms of childbirth: death is present at the poet's birth:
In the groin of the natural doorway I crouched like a tailor
Sewing a shroud for a journey
By the light of the meat-eating sun.

"Dressed to die" the poet sets out on his life's journey "in the final
direction of the elementary town." This is a trivial enough piece,
but more interestingly, the theme of death is treated differently in
"After the Funeral" and "The tombstone told when she died" in that
the poet is concerned with someone other than himself. The total
preoccupation with himself found in the earlier volumes gives way here
to a concern and a compassion for the deaths of others. It is cer¬
tainly still very personal poetry, but it is notable that it is
beginning to look outwards from the poet's being to embrace the lives,
suffering and deaths of other men and women, a development more fully
realised in Deaths and Entrances.

The concern for or interest in others is evident in the way
Thomas's treatment of love begins to involve another person. Although
still largely writing of sexual activity, he can rise above the ex¬
clusiveness of earlier poems and present a dramatic encounter in
"Not from this anger," in which poem there is a concentration of
imaginative effort on the specific occasion which gives it a
strength and interest greater than the earlier adolescent gestures
towards sex. The frustrated anger of the speaker, the sense of
isolation, of agonizing divorce from the lover is boldly expressed in
the physical stress of words and images:

Not from this anger, anticlimax after
Refusal struck her loin and the lame flower
Bent like a beast to lap the singular floods
In a land strapped by hunger
Shall she receive a bellyful of weeds
And bear those tendril hands I touch across
The agonized, two seas.
Many words are still wrenched from their normal literal meaning and forced into some strange figurative uses, but there is a directness which derives from the awareness of externalities. A similar feature is found in such poems as "The tombstone told when she died" which presents the situation of a bride who died before her marriage was consummated, "A saint about to fall" and "If my head hurt a hair's foot," in which Thomas writes as the father of the child that is to be born or as the mother. The poems gain clarity and purposeful vigour from their grounding in the events of the poet's own life which involve him in a relationship with other people.

Thomas continued to publish the occasional poem about his own writing life, such as, "Because the pleasure bird whistles," "When all my five and country senses see," and "Once it was the colour of saying." In the first of these poems, we find Thomas writing at the turn of a year (the poem was first published in *Twentieth Century Verse* under the title of "January 1939"), considering whether he should turn to look at the remains of the year that is just past. He associates his position with that of Lot's wife as she turned to take a last look at Sodom. Presumably the poet is thinking that it may be better to look forward and not dwell on the year past lest he be consumed in the ashes of his memories of the old year which is "Toppling and burning in the muddle of towers and galleries." Connecting the "pleasure-bird" of the opening line with the concept of a city of sin, suggests that the year past is one of which the poet may have need to be ashamed and which would cause trouble if looked back upon. The poet sounds guilty about his sensual life, a vital part of his being as is evident from "When all my five and country senses see."
My one and noble heart has witnesses
In all love's countries, that will grope awake;
And when blind asleep drops on the spying senses,
The heart is sensual, though five eyes break.

In "Once it was the colour of saying," another poem on the subject
of writing, Thomas observes his past sensuality with a wry humour:

When I whistled with matching boys through a reservoir park
Where at night we stoned the cold and cuckoo
Lovers in the dirt of their leafy beds;
The shade of their trees was a word of many shades
And a lamp of lightning for the poor in the dark.

He acknowledges his earlier preoccupation with sex as a solitary,
probably masturbatory pleasure - the sexual adventures of an adolescent
voyeur, whereas he was by then writing as a lover and a father, a
development which gives the poems direction and a wider appeal because
the situation itself is less self-centred and inward-looking. The
poem is also interesting for its observations on Thomas's methods of
composition: the "colour of saying" is to be of less importance than
it was before, and instead, he enigmatically says,

Now my saying shall be my undoing,
And every stone I wind off like a reel.

It is in "After the funeral" that we can notice the direction
which is given to those poems which are informed by a sense of
occasion and an awareness of people or matters outside himself, and
although the syntax is complicated and the diction inflated, the
totality of the poem is readily approached. At moments the poem has
the strength of a simple eloquence adequately founded in compassion:

I know her scrubbed and sour humble hands
Lie with religion in their cramp, her threadbare
Whisper in a damp word, her wits drilled hollow,
Her fist of a face died clenched on a round pain;
And sculptured Ann is seventy years of stone.
The theme of such a poem is not trivial, nor are many of the others even if they do not embody the profound philosophical or spiritual concepts which might be expected of a "great" poet; but the main difficulty despite a simplicity of theme, remains the apparent inaccessibility of some poems and the general habit of adopting an inflated rhetoric and convoluted syntax. Where poems like "After the funeral" succeed because the 'situation' of the experience is clear, many fail or partially fail because it is obscured. Even in the small matter of title there is no help since Thomas numbered the poems, so that the poem "A saint about to fall" loses the help given by its original title, "Poem in the ninth month," in communicating the situation, and "If my head hurt a hair's foot", which is commonly taken to be a dialogue between mother and unborn child, gives no indication of the situation, thus unnecessarily obscuring the meaning. In addition, several poems continue the habit of interspersing the basic grammatical components of a sentence with a series of difficult clauses and phrases whose meanings and inter-relationships are not clear:

How shall my animal
Whose wizard shape I trace in the cavernous skull,
Vessel of abscesses and exultation's shell,
Endure burial under the spelling wall,
The invoked, shrouding veil at the cap of the face,
Who should be furious,
Drunk as a vineyard snail, flailed like an octopus,
Roaring, crawling, quarrel
With the outside weathers,
The natural circle of the discovered skies
Draw down to its weird eyes.

The poet gains by this method a powerful compression of description, for he is willing to qualify any word with a phrase or clause; the result is a poetry crammed with potential meaning - there is never a shortage of associations, suggestions and evocations - but
which often demands a conscious 'sorting out' of relationships.
When the method is successful the lines achieve a richness of signifi-
cance and an effective ambiguity, as here where the adverbial
phrase "After the funeral" is separated from the main statement by
eleven lines, but where the funeral images in apposition are dominated
by the emphasis of "I stand" and hence are recognised easily as being
appositional:

After the funeral, mule praises, brays
Windshake of sailshaped ears, muffle-toed tap
Tap happily of one ped in the thick
Grave's foot, blinds down the lids, the teeth in black,
The spittled eyes, the salt ponds in the sleeves,
Morning snack of the spade that wakes up sleep,
Shakes a desolate boy who slit his throat
In the dark of the coffin and sheds dry leaves,
That breaks one bone to light with a judgement clout,
After the feast of tear-stuffed time and thistles
In a room with a stuffed fox and a stale fern,
I stand.

The opening phrases explicitly states the situation or occasion, and
the proliferating images are not particularly difficult to follow, but
the vital factor in the success of the lines is the way the stark,
monosyllabic stresses of "I stand" arrest the flow of images and force
the reader's attention to the central statement, the main clause of
the extremely long sentence.

Where Thomas's practice of "breeding" images out of each other
leads to a partial breakdown of communication is where it is uncertain
what the subject of the images is, where although the particular
references of images are absorbed, they do not adequately circumscribe
the idea to which they refer. The result is that a series of images
operate without the reader being aware of what abstraction is being
made concrete, because there is neither an explicit indication of the
subject-matter (as there is in "After the funeral" and "The tombstone
told when she died"), nor a sense of direction in the images through which understanding of the subject will become implicitly clear. The effect is that words and images seem to work at a surface level, making much noise, offering some disconnected and ineffable notions, but failing to cohere into a purposeful expression of concrete particulars. Some critics profess to approve of such technique and accept the tenuous links with coherent communication that it involves, but most demand a more cohesive statement and approve of those poems in which it is found. The former are content with a poetry which at best provides a suggestion of significance through vague musicality and the disparate elements of violent imagery:

How shall it magnetize,
Towards the studded male in a bent, midnight blaze
That melts the lionhead's heel and horseshoe of the heart,
A brute land in the cool top of the country days
To trot with a loud mate the haybeds of a mile,
Love and labour and kill
In quick, sweet, cruel light till the locked ground sprout out,
The black, burst sea rejoice,
The bowels turn turtle,
Claw of the crabbed veins squeeze from each red particle
The parched and raging voice.

It is a type of poetry which leads to the endless ingenuity of the exegetical approach but which successfully evades the value judgements of the other critics who demand a poetic content which is a function of the mode of expression, and which is more accessible:

The tombstone told when she died.
Her two surnames stopped me still.
A virgin married at rest.
She married in this pouring place,
That I struck one day by luck,
Before I heard in my mother's side
Or saw in the looking-glass shell
The rain through her cold heart speak
And the sun killed in her face.

Some critics have denied Thomas's poetry to be meaningful at all,
an attitude and response as false and as unhelpful as Read's claim that it is the most 'absolute' of its time. Read is overwhelmingly enthusiastic but unconstructive, for no more than grand gestures are made which embrace poet and verse in a generous claim of greatness, without his offering comparisons with recognisably great poets or evidence from within the poetry of themes of such universal and lasting import as to justify the claim. At the opposite extreme, critics dismiss the themes as trivialities and the technical skill as fraud, an extreme as unqualified in its denigration as its opposite is in its praise. The criticism which offers a balanced view of poetry and of poet's development is there, but is rather overshadowed by the historionics of the greatly impressed and the caustic dismissals of the unmoved. But from all of this emerges a picture of what Thomas meant to the audience of this time: he is, above all else, a peculiar case, a bardic visionary whose incantations have little connection with the verse of the time, a poet whose technical skill is undoubtedly startling but who probably indulges to excess in showing off his virtuosity at the expense of concentrating his meaning in taut verses, which gives the impression that he composes carelessly. The recognition by many reviewers that Thomas is directing his writing towards the clarity which comes from the sense of occasion and the more concrete particularisation of the setting of the poem is noteworthy, but it is only with the later publication of *Deaths and Entrances* that there is widespread appreciation of such advances in technique and in the conception and presentation of his subject matter.
There is a greater interval between The Map of Love and Deaths and Entrances than between the previous publications, probably because the war years were not only a time of national crisis, but of personal agony for Thomas:

He regarded the war as a personal affront. It interfered with his writing; it dried up such slender sources of income as he possessed: and it was likely to destroy him physically, or, at best, to condemn him to an indefinite sentence of military service.

His attitude to the threat of war was plainly selfish, just as even the best of his war poems are self-orientated even when celebrating an external happening:

Along will come conscription, and the military tribunal and stretcher-bearing or jail or the Boy's Fire League. And all I want is time to write poems, I'm only getting going now, and enough money to keep two and a bit alive ... For my little money-sources - (apart from anything else) - are diminishing or dying. Soon there will not be a single paper paying inadequately for serious stories and poems.

Thomas was not going to war, thanking God and feeling like a "swimmer into cleanness leaping;" and even if the spirit exemplified by Rupert Brook is now unfashionable and was in its own time made a mockery by the holocaust that followed, Thomas was unpleasantly over-concerned with his own predicament.

The effect of the war on his poetry was a development of a greater awareness of others than himself, for despite the selfishness, he was observant of the civilian terrors and agonies; his poetry of
the war is limited by his romantic imagination, for it portrays suffering not as a universal condition but in terms of its effect on himself. The resulting poetry is arresting and much of it is good, but it does not completely involve the reader by demanding a response in sympathy with the subject. When Thomas treats the grief involved in the death of a child, he does not speak in hushed, agonizing tones which pierce the reader, but rather in tones with a cathedral voice, declaring as the prophet of death the appalling, senseless cruelty of the death which is "blindly magnified out of praise." Yet the greater assuredness of poetic purpose and the concentration of the poet's emotions which derives from the war-time themes gives a new clarity and vigour to the poetry and greater definition of attitude to the criticism. The immediate situation of the years 1939 to 1946 is that because of severe publishing restrictions in the United Kingdom, we have to turn to the United States for a continuation of critical comment on Thomas; this was stimulated by the publication of *New Poems* in the U.S.A., and it was only with the appearance of *Deaths and Entrances* that the British contribution picks up again.

Articles by Francis Scarfe, Marshall Stearms and Robert Horan form a considerable contribution during the period of the war; they deal with technique, imagery, and especially with the relationship between poet and subject (and hence implicitly between poet and reader). Much of what is said concerns not a discussion of whether Thomas is a romantic in theme and method, but of the nature and acceptability of his brand of romanticism. The attitude typified by Conrad Aiken is permissive of a much loosely conceived and loosely evolved writing.
The truth is that a wholehearted romantic revival is much overdue; and it is the poets who must themselves bring it to pass. They must throw the critics and schoolmasters out of the window, neck and crop, and the sociologists as well; and then themselves re-establish poetry where it belongs — not in the margins of a textbook, but as coterminous with our awareness of the world. It is in the nature of English poetry to be romantic — it has never at its best been anything else ... our private loves and terrors, like the grass blade, the sun and the unexploded atom will still be in fashion when the social cleavages and surfaces of our day, with all their ephemeral lumber, will have been forgotten ... Let the poet first of all rediscover himself. If he will do this, the rest will follow. Already there are signs of what may be to come, in the brilliantly imaginative poems of Mr. Dylan Thomas, a young Englishman with a genius for word-magic, a genuine and outrageous gift-of-the-gab, and in the richly framed psychological delvings and shapings of a young American, Delmore Schwartz. Mr. Thomas is violent and vivid, as a poet should be; he is a chameleon for colours, a word-spout, full of mad nonsense and humours, prodigal of affects — if his meanings too often escape us, nevertheless he can be read with joy for the shape and shine alone.95

Poetry certainly is to do with "our awareness of the world," but Aiken's implied definition of 'romantic' excludes "the social cleavages and surfaces of our day" whilst demanding that the poet should rediscover himself. He must have forgotten Wordsworth's interest in the French Revolution, Shelley's admittedly wild, yet political ideas and Tennyson's forced treatment of social concerns. Romanticism is less a matter of themes and more of approach, involvement, imagination and method, and when the "genius" of Dylan Thomas is described in Aiken's terms, such as "word-spout", and his poetry is said to be enjoyable for "the shape and shine alone", it is not a romantic genius that is being depicted. Aiken presents a

95 Conrad Aiken, "Back to Poetry", Atlantic Monthly, CLXVI (1940), 217.
corrupt romanticism by implying that it can be accepted as good poetry when it is an exercise in self-indulgent word-play (with "meanings which too often escape us"); the laxity in his standards is merely an encouragement to the poetic masturbator who delights in playing with words and who incidentally allows the reader to observe the act and derive what vicarious pleasure he can from it.

The most obviously romantic feature of Thomas's poetry is his own relationship to poem and reader, an important topic which is raised in the American articles of this period, and one which involves the method and technique as well. But it is in Scrutiny that we find the first of a number of articles which attack the laxity of critical standards shown by so many Thomas critics. W. H. Mellers incisively condemns uncritical adulation:

> But the next step, that which presents Dylan Thomas as the god-given laureate mumbling his magic incantations to the spirit of the Earth, is perhaps more vicious in that it stands, with its untrammelled genius that defies intelligibility, beyond criticism by all but those who are likewise 'inspired.'

He is not willing to accept the "distraught romantic genius" and the assumption that the reader can be fooled into believing that the more difficult a work, the better it is, and wishes to penetrate the exterior of the poetry and seek what it contains. He questions the Sitwellian attitude, asking whether "with all this abundance of stormy gestures there is a solid core, the experience created, the emotion felt and realised." And he notes Thomas's gift for the "trenchant phrase" and his technique of "perpetual exaggeration, almost of distortion" in imagery and rhythm, which amounts to a

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96 W. H. Mellers, Scrutiny, IX (1940-41), 76.
"continual bludgeoning of the reader's responsiveness". These are apt criticisms, but Mellers reserves his main assault for the content of the poems, finding it difficult to accept Thomas as an adult because of his caricaturing of experiences with the "semi-comic exuberance of a schoolboy." He believes that the awed acceptance of Thomas as a "god-given laureate" is the consequence of his concentration on childhood and adolescence, his failure to reveal maturity, and a re-creation of the pathetic fallacy in a "jaded twentieth-century Byron." His poetry becomes ingrown:

The trouble with Dylan Thomas grown up is that his interests - his terrors and raptures and desires - are identical with those of Dylan Thomas the child. Because he is in fact no longer a child he feels that he must needs falsify these fears and desires, must attribute them an importance that they cannot properly pretend to. His writing then becomes pivoted on himself, an orgy of self-commiseration. He is the bard, the "last romantic," buffeted and maltreated by a despicable Fortune.

Mellers complains also of "incantatory rhythm and amorphous images" which dull the sensitivity of the reader, the basis of his criticism being that Thomas has little to say of adult importance and that his style is such that it disguises the poverty of the theme by its loose ambiguities and its bombastic expression. He cannot accept the standards of Conrad Aiken if they mean that a prodigality of effects, a spout of words are to be enjoyed for "the shape and the shine alone"; these attributes are described by him as "an orgy of self-commiseration," a distinct opposition of reaction to the same feature. Of the two critical stances, Mellers's is clearly the more demanding since it calls for a maturity of outlook and for a degree of intellectual discipline; above all it implies
that poetry is a social activity because it involves the active participation of the reader. Aiken adopted an attitude in which he has to accept the risk of assessing the most obscurely self-orientated confessions of an immature verbalizer as good poetry. The neo-romantic critic often approves of Thomas because he approves of poetry which is loudly demonstrative of the poet's self; the 'I' in the poetry is not a mask, not a Tiresias, but an ingrowing personality involved in a mysterious communion with the world.

The most serious limitation of the kind of poem whose meanings are not clear but whose appearance is in some way attractive is that it may not involve the reader; the poet's relationship to his subject is so exclusively personal that the poem becomes too remote from the reader - it operates on a level of verbal activity which can only be observed. The central experience of the poem is enclosed and presented to us encapsulated, so that its effect is not mind-expanding; the experience contained does not create reverberations in the mind or emotions of the reader. Poetry is a shared activity if it is to be more than a mere prose statement, for it does not just communicate a thought or fact, but rather excites the reader's response to an active sharing of the experience and a development of its implications. The poet has to make the experience shareable, both by making himself, as narrator, responsible for expressing universally significant reactions to the experience (even in the most intensely Romantic poem) and by making communicable sense, by not neglecting the requirement that the poem should be anchored closely enough in comprehended sense for the writer and the reader to be relating it to the same kind of other experiences.97

The failure to 'anchor' a poem in comprehended sense is in Thomas the result of his being too exclusively involved in his vision of himself in the world; he has declared his intention to communicate, but only communicates well when he involves the reader in more than mere interpretation of 'difficult' images.

The critic has to interpret and so he has good reason to explore the elements of meaning which go towards the total expression, but Thomas does encourage many critics to present these elements as if that were enough. Because Thomas too often excludes the reader from sharing his experience and vision while clothing it in obscure or difficult imagery, the school of criticism apparently devoted to explication is attracted to his work. Aiken represents the critics who accept vaguely conceived romanticism as a reason for over-stating the significance of the poetry while ignoring its self-indulgence and pretentiousness; Sellers is one of those who demand more than "shape and shine" and who assess Thomas according to fairly stringent standards; and Francis Scarfe is fairly typical of those who tease out meanings, explore sources and influences, but who too often forget to consider the poetic experience in its wholeness. He assesses Thomas's position as the most promising poet under thirty, but wishes to clarify the nature of the promise by 'plumbing' the images:

For many people his poems are puzzles, seeming to offer at first reading no more than a forbidding cliff, impenetrable to reason, from which there just great crags of capricious imagery. 98

He eschews "the metaphysicals, Sitwellism and surrealism" in making an approach, asserting that the true points of contact are through

Joyce, the Bible and Freud, in linguistic, mythological and psychopathological terms; the essay is concerned with Thomas's use of words, his religious symbolism and his treatment of sex.

The invention of words and the forcing together of contradictory words are seen as causes of obscurity and annoyance and the result of vague thinking:

The invention of words, then, is inevitable in the expression of the half-perceived, incoherent sensations and ideas. And as his pen hovers between a host of choices, seeking some short-cut to expression as the surrealists do by automatism, Dylan Thomas invents such terms as mar-iron, bonerailed, seaspindle, seastruck, all-hollowed, pin-hilled, natron.

He accepts "verbal tricks" in the sonnets of Twenty-five Poems, but not in later poems:

In his later poems (since 1936) Thomas has diluted these verbal surprises. That his poems still startle our complacency is a proof that his first appeal was not due to mere bogus verbalism. It is well that he is losing some of those habits, which lead to preciousness of the most pompous kind. Not that it is to be despised, for preciousness itself can reveal a wealth of unsuspected fact. All poetry is precious.

There is poor thinking here: the startling of complacency is proof of nothing much - a single swear word can achieve that - and it is not clear how poetry can be precious, unless he is using 'precious' to indicate the connotations of the French 'précieux'.

Biblical and sexual symbolism are more productive topics than word-inventions, yet the treatment is still restricted to description and demonstration. The Biblical element is that of the "hot gospelling and the diabolical grimace of the Welsh Bethel," and is eventually merged with an interpretation of a universe which
is sexually dynamic; bird beast and stone share the same (sexual) life with man (an advance on the pretty pantheism of Wordsworth), but, for ever conscious of a sense of sin, Thomas conveys this as something terrible.

Certainly, Thomas's universe is "dynamic, frighteningly active and alive," but there remains the unanswered question of whether it bears any meaningful relationship to the universe of other men. Not only does the style of many of the poems preclude the involvement of the reader's intellect and sensibility, but the nightmarish and grotesque vision of life that is presented may seem quite unrelated to the reader's own understanding and experience. Thus a poem like "Find meat on bones" not only speaks in a way which puzzles and excludes the reader but also expresses (in a vague, impressionist way) a situation foreign to the reader. Scarfe does not explain clearly enough the sexual dynamism of Thomas's universe (what sexual life does a stone possess?) nor the nature of the supposed advance that has been made on Wordsworth (who is unfairly maligned).

Religion is said to be fused with sex and shown in the dualism of death and life related to the "body-soul" motif of "I in my intricate image" (although the poem contrasts the man as man with the man as poet rather than indulges in theological dispute on body and soul).

Because he sees Thomas expressing the triumph of the body over death, Scarfe believes that he is able to "confuse sexual and spiritual values in the ten 'religious' sonnets," poems which are mainly to do with the "life death antagonism." The article as before describes technique rather than explains significance:
The technique is cumulative, impressionistic, though in one or two sonnets the subject is directly presented. Subjects, rather, for though the theme is the life-death antagonism, it is inextricably bound up with Old and New Testament mythology and sexual symbolism. It is rash to reduce such works to a formula, but for me they represent a double pattern of Biblical and sexual imagery, the recognizable characters being Satan (identified with death and sin) sex (i.e. life, represented by Adam and even Gabriel), Mary (the justification of sex through childbearing and suffering, but none the less a worldly symbol), and Christ (victim and blood-offering rather than hero).

Sin and nature are identified with sex through the Bible in the second sonnet ("Death is all metaphors, shape in one history"), and third ("First there was a lamb on knocking knees") although confused, illustrates the use of 'montage' to express in sensually but not intellectually rich verse, "a sense of time, the foreshadowed conflict of life and death principles, against a scriptural and sexual background." Love and sex are mystically presented in sonnet four ("What is the metre of the dictionary?") before the treatment of the Nativity in the fifth ("And from the windy West came two-gunned Gabriel") with its "cabbalistic tricks", and in the sixth ("Cartoon of slashes on the tide-traced crater") with what he calls "a gruesome conception and nativity in one." "Now stamp the Lord's prayer on a grain of rice" is said to summarise Christ's life, concentrating legend and man and universe in its rhetoric, and bringing "together the literal fanatic, doubting Thomas and the twentieth-century modernist, while before them lies a world of living fact in which spiritual and physical realities meet." The crucifixion is explicitly the subject of the eighth sonnet ("This was the crucifixion on the mountain"), a poem which is said to symbolize the birth of love in the death of sex, a disturbing conclusion of sexual frustration.
The conclusion to be drawn... is disturbing. After presenting in all his poems a brilliant sexual interpretation of life, Dylan Thomas has here presented a sexual interpretation of death. The secret of death, and its horror, is that it is sexless.

Later poems and found to be less Biblical and more ritualistic, but the evidence is too slight to accept a great significance in the movement. Thomas's 'religious' poems obviously demonstrate a background of Welsh chapel and the Old Testament, but it would be wrong to infer that these are any more than sources of imagery and allusion. Religion and church ritual are used in the poetry, frequently to an incantatory end, but Thomas is not intellectually concerned with Christianity, though his verse reveals an Old Testament sense of sin.

The following section shows confusion arising from the answers made to the New Verse 'Enquiry' that "poetry must drag further into the clear nakedness of light even more of the hidden causes than Freud could realise." Scarfe takes this to be an "admission that he had been influenced by Freud," which it is not, even if it indicates a linking of poet and psycho-analyst in terms of their mutual intention to expose the deepest motivations of man. He makes too much of the idea of 'influence' and of the need for Freudian analysis:

The influence is first of all general, understandable in a poet whose chief preoccupation is to explore childhood and adolescence. Only a reader of Freud can receive the full impact, which is enormous of Dylan Thomas's predominantly sexual imagery.

It is manifestly absurd to say that the reader needs more than a rudimentary acquaintance with sexual symbolism to receive whatever impact lines like these may contain:
A grief ago,
She who was who I hold, the fats and flower,
Or, water-lammed, from the scythe-sided thorn,
Hell wind and sea,
A stem cementing, wrestled up the tower,
Rose maid and male,
Or masted venus, through the paddler's bowl
Sailed up the sun

Thomas's early poems are largely adolescent and reveal characteristic adolescent preoccupations with death and sex, and in his conscious attempt to expose the often terrifyingly ugly nature of such preoccupations he uses a wide range of sexual imagery. Apart from a remote alliance of Thomas and Freud in their psychoanalytic intent, the main help offered by Freudian theories is to made us unsurprised that the poet was preoccupied by sex and frightened by it and that much of the sexual imagery is male "to the point of onanism and homosexuality." Scarfe is more certain of his ground when he concludes with a comment on Thomas's idea of the sexlessness of death:

The words 'unsex the skeleton' are a good indication of Thomas's problem, the reconciling of the creative and destructive elements of sex. In view of the prevailing sense of sin, this suspicion that sex is not an end in itself, and that the ultimate objective is irremediably obscure, it must be concluded that the poet's interpretation of sex is still as close to the Old Testament as to the psychology of Freud. The Bible provides the mythology by which the problem can be raised to a high and universal plane, while Freud gives the impetus to what is perhaps the most overwhelming and poignant sexual imagery in modern poetry.

The idea of the poet's allegiance to Freud is, in the end, less definite, but nowhere does the critic suggest that he is writing of an aspect of poetry which contributes to the essential limitations of its interest and its significance: instead he elevates the impact of stark adolescent obsessions through terms like "a high and
universal plane" and "overwhelming and poignant sexual imagery."

Thomas's sexual and 'religious' poetry at this time, was immature and pervaded with a sense of horrors: if a female figure appears, she is merely a sex-object upon which innumerable fantasies can be played out - nowhere is she the object of love and tenderness. The poetry ultimately lacks the personal responsibility of an adult towards others, and the warmth of affection which characterizes a mature relationship: the result may be fascinating but the poetry is limited. The poetry can be interesting and enjoyable to read, but as an observation on the human condition it remains confined and sometimes claustrophobic because of its narrow range:

The sexual symbolism in the poems seems to work largely as an assertion of sexuality, of the sexual basis of all thought and action. Secondly, the poems also contain some implied defences of this sexuality, justifications offered by the poet to society and to his own conscience. A little probing reveals not a liberated body but an obsessed mind (as in D. H. Lawrence).

The subjective narrowness of Thomas's themes reveals his selfish interest in his poetry: in laying bare the principles of his own existence he has had to create a world of conflicting forces and processes in which to have a meaningful life. The world of his poetry is recreated in the reader's imagination but remained a strange and impenetrable place of nightmare and obsession until the poet began to observe aspects more radiant than the ghouls, worms and cancers of the sexual world embodied in the earlier volumes. A critic like Scarfe records the nature of Thomas's poetic world but is distracted by the methods and techniques into explaining the components of the poems without saying what they eventually combine into. A poem need not have a paraphrasable prose meaning, but it
must be a unified creation which is about something, no matter how intangible; the poet should make concrete that which is abstract, and the critic's concern should be to explain where necessary the symbolised level of meaning. When Scarfe writes that "the more subjective a poem, the clearer the narrative line," and that the poems have "a strong core of subject round which the imagery is grouped" he is firstly failing to mention the suffocating effect of the intense subjectivity and secondly implying that subject and imagery are separate quantities, rather than that the subject is only expressed and comprehended through the words which are the poem. Even when praising a particular poem, "After the funeral," he writes that "a wealth of imagery is subdued to the subject" in a movement through the four phases of "the burial, the feast, the character and the homage," as if the subject existed without the images expressing it.

One reason for possible confusion is that the poet is so absorbed in magnifying his emotional response to an experience that his imagery becomes tautological and tedious, and since the response is introspective and does not echo in the reader, he is misled into observing the simple response separately from a wealth of imagery which merely reiterates identical responses. Scarfe concluded that the right direction for Thomas's poetry to develop was towards a closer relationship between verbal inventiveness and the purpose of a poem (which did occur), but his enthusiasm for the vision of a sexual basis of life is less well-founded and fortunately was not to remain a central theme:
His future depends on an enlarging of his simple vision of the sexual basis of life, and it is to be hoped that he will not abandon his essential subject. That problem in itself, and his evident conflict as to its solution, should provide him with an inexhaustible and vital theme. He is potentially the most modern of the young poets now writing, because of his assimilation of Joyce, Freud and the Bible, and because so far he has rejected the influence of the generation immediately preceding his own. He, like no other young poet save perhaps George Barker and Ruthven Todd, is his own poet. Thomas is the most old-fashioned of his generation in his apparent separation of his poetry from his politics. This might yet prove valuable. Technically he has little to do save to give his verbal inventions better grounding in reality and in philology, to concentrate even more on that 'main moving column', and to concede less to that delight in a grimace by which every poet is tempted.

The isolation of the poet in the world he creates and the exclusion of the reader from it affects theme and the style of expression: Marshall Stearns discusses technique on this basis, although his commentary on subject matter is not so clearly based on it:

He rejects what he considers the static concepts of death, earthly love, and religion ("the words of death are dryer than "the corpse of Jesus), and selects 'man' as the theme of his poetry, "man living, loving, using his five senses and functioning fully:" as Drew and Sweeney have said. And more. Man for Thomas is man from seed to grave, with the emphasis on the grave, and the poet constantly attempts to view the entire progression simultaneously.99

From convenience or necessity, Thomas's "attempts to view the entire progression simultaneously" are made entirely by exploration of himself. Before the poems of Deaths and Entrances there is little or no reference outside his own personality except in terms of the vegetable and inanimate universe. He was not concerned with man in society nor with value-judgements on man's activities, but was wholly

involved in exposing his emotional and physiological nature. Stearns' acceptance that "man be my metaphor" is the basis of Thomas's poetry must be qualified by the awareness of the limitations of his perspective. When he speaks of the poetry's religiousness, there is a similar modification in the reference to Thomas's rebellious attitude, and on its sexuality; he mentions that the exposure of sexual concerns is the result of "strong personal need." Such poetry is a corrupt form of romanticism, not an exploration of the world through the imagination of the artist as that world impinges upon it, but an onanistic release from sexual frustration.

Thomas's efforts to express the simultaneous existence of conflicting forces in himself and his world are most evident in the commingling of themes of life, death, sin and punishment through suffering, destruction, creation and chaos in a form of expression whose verbal tensions reflect the thematic tensions. Stearns does not believe that "the dualism of life-death, body-soul and sex-sin" is reconciled, despite the attempt through a dialectical mode of expression to achieve an Hegelian process of "thesis, antithesis and synthesis":

In his handling of imagery, then, Thomas is consciously attempting an interesting experiment, although his use of the Hegelian dialectic is limited and without any ideological basis. It may be simply a rationalisation of a personal manner of expression. For the poet is anti-philosophical in a literal sense: he subscribes to no one school of thought, he has read and been influenced by few great books of the preceding ages, and he leans, one supposes, toward the opinion that little is valid above and beyond the level of spontaneous emotion. It may be added that if Thomas's use of dialectic has any appeal to the professional Marxists, it has yet to be noted.
Using "light breaks where no sun shines" as an example, Stearns arrives at the conclusion that somewhere in the process, the reader is shut out:

The poem is a good example of Thomas's dialectical method in practice. It is full of warring images which occasionally result in direct contradictions, such as "things of light" filing through flesh where there is no flesh. Unfortunately, the "warring images" are sometimes at war with themselves; the "momentary peace which is a poem" does not eventuate, and the over-worked reader sometimes finds himself undergoing the discouraging experience of appearing to discover an adequate or even thrilling meaning of a phrase (on what was doubtless intended to be a lower level of connotation), only to realise upon careful re-examination that the phrase is more complex than he first thought and rather defies interpretation. A truce dictated by exhaustion rather than by Thomas results.

His conclusion is that the method is the consequence of the times:

Although it may be doubtful value to speculate upon the question of how the poet arrived at his dialectic method of handling imagery, one may be permitted to wonder whether or not it mirrors an inner confusion. If it does, and I see little reason to doubt it, the poet has chosen a functional manner of expressing his experience in the world of today.

Thomas is regarded here as a modernist who is forced to reflect the impossibility of achieving a certainty of vision and purpose in an unstable and fragmented civilization, yet his predicament does not appear to be particularly a modern one, for it is not expressly the result of social observation. To record "inner confusion" in a "functional manner" perhaps means that the recorded confusion is a function of a confused mode of expression: there is a difference between poetry that expresses confusion and one which reflects confusion in its own chaos. Thomas in the early volumes is not always sufficiently detached from his inner turmoil to avoid allowing his expression to be correspondingly chaotic, and it is only when he has
the stimulus of a specific event (such as the death of Ann Jones) or of a particular place (such as Fern Hill), that he achieves the detachment necessary to make his manner of expression the servant of his poetic purpose.

Any argument which treats a subject and the verbal details of its expression as separate matters must be conducted warily since the subject, the experiential content, is only apprehended in the detail of the words. Any idea, thought or emotion understood from a poem is understood entirely from the words and cannot exist separately from the words other than in the poet's mind. The crucial issue in the criticism is whether the details of the verbal expression are entirely directed towards the communication of the poet's purpose, or whether violent clashing of the imagery spends its fury in raising a superficial turmoil irrelevant to the experiential situation being described. Poetry cannot be reduced to the barest functional statement and enhancement of expression by ornamentation has its proper place (although currently unfashionable), but a demand for communication implies that the means of enhancing the poem must not obtrude and must not obscure or dilute the force of the subject's expression. Because Thomas was creating a unique visionary world in his poetry in order that he might convince himself of his existence and of his nature, he inevitably caused difficulties in his expression of the details of this world in all its horrors, confusions, contradictions and mortal agonies and as if aware of the limitations of language to contain his vision, he piles image upon image in order to make sure that somewhere in a welter of words he has created the detail and atmosphere of his vision. Just as the nature of his vision is
strange and forbidding, so his method eventually dissuades rather than persuades the reader, obscures rather than clarifies; but he has his supporters in the American criticism of the period before Deaths and Entrances.

Robert Horan, writing for the Kenyon Review, defends Thomas on the grounds that we have to recognize "the complexity of ornamentation as an expression of the necessities of his subject matter, rather than as indulgent verbalising" in order to appreciate the subtleties of the poet's judgement. He believes that it is the nature of the subject matter which makes Thomas difficult:

There is a kind of subject matter currently passing for profound and personal content among both younger and older poets. Auden, for instance, has evolved a cryptic, Noel Coward shorthand, cautiously glamorous, flattered by his own sensitivity like a public-school prodigy. Saturated with self-consciousness, more and more poems appear from the tomb of Henry James or the bier of Freud. These are gratuitous identifications with tradition, distinctly 'literary subject matters,' apathetic and indulgent, conditioned by an attitude toward experience that begins to sound professional, as if it were lived through in order to be written about. Thomas has escaped this contagion, even if at the cost of publication in the 'Atlantic Monthly'.

Thomas's subject matter does expose incongruities and uncertainties in the shape of guilt, laceration, expiation. It is an effort to free memory from the stictures of paternity, from religion and from death; to establish the unique individual, not merely as the victim, but as the agent of choice; not alone 'created by history' but 'creative in history'.

Although he writes of Thomas's self-pity, his melancholy and romantic symbolism, Horan denies that he is merely histrionic and perversely private and sentimental; nor does he consider the habit of "embedding the context of any given poem in layer upon layer of

100 Robert Horan, "In Defence of Dylan Thomas," Kenyon Review, VII (Spring 1945), 304.
imagery and texture" causes obscurity. The attempt to "render instantaneously his whole emotional world" often fails, but can succeed uniquely (it is another matter whether the reader finds Thomas's emotional world credible or interesting) in a violent form which "indicates desire driving itself towards necessity, desire to free himself from the infantile kingdom where freedom is synonymous with sin and from the world of social sentimentality, immoral in Joyce's sense of refusal to accept 'the enormous responsibility for a thing done'".

The energy of the world depicted in the early poetry comes through mainly as an individual struggle with phantom shapes, nightmare visions of maggots in corpses, of death in the sexual act and so on; Horan recognizes a violence behind the modern poetic impulse which many try to control:

It is true that poets of Thomas's generation have become embarrassed by the inertia or the violence of their material. Inasmuch as the spontaneous work of such writers tends to withstand the formal control and organisation which is necessary to realise it fully, they turn, instinctively and with apparent apology, to a frame, a "classical" control of energy. These poets serve a kind of metrical penance for emotional sins and excesses, as if it legalised their intentions and restored them to the sanctity of tradition. They hold on to an orthodox form and a combustible content, a cage in one hand and a wild beast in the other. But, although these are simultaneous on the page, they rarely enclose each other. More often, the poem is constricted in its prison, without pulse or breath, emasculated by a technical rigidity that is fatal in its perfection.

It is easy to accept with Horan that Thomas does not sacrifice "the explosive imagery of his poetry to a monastic shape" and that techniques like alliteration, assonance and half-rhyme can give poems "fresh and fine definition," but he is right to qualify his comments by showing that the intense personalization of the vision
and an amount of confusion about the real subject gives rise to faults:

An insecurity in Thomas's approach to his earliest material, and the tendency to compensate for this insecurity, which is properly the recognition of his true subject matter, led him to overestimate the power of association as an instrument of unifying meaning in poetry, to rely too heavily on cumulative rhythm and the devices of litany. A kind of interior cohesion in this work was deflected in a heavy body of incident and illustration. This attempt to surround a subject from continuously shifting levels of time, space and emotion sets up problems of perspective and chronology that cloud as often as they amplify the vision. This fault diminishes where a stable, physical point of observation has been established, permitting abundance rather than fragmentation.

His experience of "Deaths and Entrances," "The Hunchback in the Park," and "Ballad of the Long-legged Bait," is of having "shared an emotional territory inexplicably wide, as if, within a few lines, one ranged back and forth in memory." Horan is aware of a central widening of Thomas's consciousness of humanity and of how it clarified his writing by moving it away from its solipsism, but he exaggerates the emotional range of even the best poems. He includes Thomas, Hart Crane, Garcia Lorca and T. S. Eliot in his assessment:

What is common to them and almost peculiar to them is the range of their feeling, and an honesty that refuses to be constricted (with the exception of Eliot's insecure exile in Anglo-Catholicism) by system. They are neither benevolent toward experience nor hostile to it; they are not essentially cynical. They may be driven by desperation, but the center, the meaning of that predicament is present, and is the substance and syllable of their work. The language is sensitive, the emotion is perilous, the conclusion is suspended, in that a greater rigidity of techniques and meanings would frustrate and sterilise the extent of feeling.

He perhaps confuses range of feeling with amount of feeling, for Thomas's poetry lacks sympathy, without which feeling cannot be other than narrowly restricted: he resorts to magnifying what feeling
there is, the "hysterica passio" of a mind tormented by its inability to reconcile the contradictions it sees in the human situation.

In recording how Thomas's violently dualistic view of life is reflected in his technique, Koran is too confident that Thomas is clear enough, but still observes accurately the relationship between form and experience:

In Thomas, particularly, the violence of his feeling, the variety of his expression and the disillusion that accompanies understanding, are wider than the nature of his convictions about them. It is in an effort to bring the diverse and almost uncontrollable poles of his observation and sympathy into the same poem, or into the same system of consciousness and value, that he strikes the fundamental problem of composition and experience. His poetry shows this awareness increasingly, with greater technical assurance, certainly, but primarily with finer precision of feeling and more developed insight. It is in this sense that I feel his grasp of reality is more shocking, and correspondingly more sensitised than those around him, who are trapped in the affluence of style, and whose main consideration is to appear only temporarily baffled by the destruction of their society. Since it is the problem of every modern artist, it could hardly have been escaped by any but the peripheral and unconscious craftsmen of our time, of whom there are many prominent. It is not the solution of this problem that is imminent in Thomas, any more than it is imminent in our society, but the recognition of it, and his unique poetic approach to its discovery. If it will not give him greater hope for his future world, it shall at least give us greater hope for his future poetry.

These American contributions show an increasingly complex critical response which takes account of the considerable improvement in the poetry largely made possible by the poet's emergence from an isolationist view which was frequently no more than self-indulgent navel-gazing:

Dylan Thomas has travelled a long distance since that line "I see the boys of summer in their ruin" was written in the early Thirties; from nihilist adolescence to almost religious maturity, the minor to the major key; spoilt
harvests and the child clawing its way back to the womb have vanished before the engulfing experience of sex; and the new nuptials bring with them a whole cosmology of loves, wars, oceans, dream travel, prehistory and legend—an exploration of human desire and fear in journeys that lead one at times to think of Melville except that here the poles of birth and death are always kept in sight. The shift, during twelve years, has been from a parched passionate utterance to the sense of glory.

The reaction to *Deaths and Entrances* on its publication in February 1946, included the usual inflationary praise and its associated denigration, but there was not then much evidence of the exegetical school. The more constructive criticism is evident, for there is considerable balanced enthusiasm for the merits of the new poems, an enthusiasm which is carefully discussed and based on recognition of the good effects of the increased maturity of the poet's observation. Thomas's improvements are variously described, but most critics appreciate the greater range of subject-matter, the greater involvement of others in his vision and some clarification of personal confusion; many reviewers record that these advances in the directing of his observation and the engagement of his imagination are responsible for his making more controlled and therefore more effective use of his verbal skills, resulting in a more accessible context, greater unity of purpose and more enjoyable poetry in which the reader can be partially active.

To the TLS reviewer, the improvement derives from faith:

As the title poem 'Deaths and Entrances' suggests, Mr. Dylan Thomas is mainly concerned with the problems of Life and Death, and supplementary speculations on Time and Eternity. The earlier symbolism and "surrealism" of this poet still remain. But there is much more clarity and fervent observation with a picturesqueness of language and imagery.

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as in 'Poem in October' and 'A Winter's Tale'. For the poet's natural love of language and its music is continually present:

The cattle stirring, the mousing cat stepping shy
The puffed birds hopping and hunting, the milkmaids
Gentle in their clogs over the fallen sky.

More deeply, however, he is the Celt seriously enquiring with a sensual rationalism into man's existence in the scheme of things. And throughout there is an inherent religious respect, with a certain Biblical imagery and allusion that suits the sexual symbolism. Though occasionally morbid and melancholic, there is an implicit faith and hope for man who should realise his small part in the continuity of Life and its attendant Time:

Time is bearing another son.
Kill Time! She turns in her pain!
The oak is felled in the acorn
And the hawk in the egg kills the wren.

But there is a greater optimism to be found in the sensitive imaginative lingering on the complexities that almost defeated another Celt, W. B. Yeats:

Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

A less perceptive reviewer is impressed by "a world of thought, perception, and those two things that go together, happiness and courage," and by the poet's undaunted spirit which offers an "incentive to life;" he fails to appreciate that although the manifest terrors of the morbid world of Eighteen Poems have mostly disappeared, the awareness of death's presence and time's destructiveness of the hand that smells of mortality is still an important stimulus; there is still a suggestion of hopeless inevitability and a void future:

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103 Life and Letters (April 1946), p.4.
Now shown and mostly bare I would lie down,
Lie down, lie down and live
As quiet as a bone,  
(Once below a time)

or again,

And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows
In all his tuneful turning so far and such morning songs
Before the children green and golden
Follow him out of grace.

(Fern Hill)

Unperceptiveness is misleading when a critic describes Thomas's
development of a more purposeful attitude like this:

The recognisable elements that go to the making of his
attitude are many, but there are anyway Welsh religious
genius and Western European cultural insight fused on a
love and pity so profound that it is he and no other poet
who has come to terms with life and death for this un-
happy generation.104

Thomas's love and pity are nowhere profound; his love is of an
expansive, all-embracing kind which never reveals a depth of emotion,
histrionic and effusive rather than penetrating and moving; his pity
is romantically limited, for he subordinates the description of the
pitiable situation (which could arouse pity in the reader) to the
expression of his own emotional response (which is only observed as
a display). The "Welsh religious genius" is supposedly found in
"Vision and Prayer", but the 'religion' is emotive and the interest
in the verse mainly technical:

Whereas some, like Henry Treece poetise religion, literary
and folk experience, and others like Terence Tiller,
secularise a symbolic occasion in an attempt to revitalise
it, Dylan Thomas's experience itself rises to the religious
level; and so it is that he gives redoubled force to what
is virtually a re-birth of the Nativity in 'Vision and
Prayer.' This poem is written with the outward form and

inward fervour of the Anglo-Welsh Henry Vaughan in sentences that seem to write themselves, in visions as diamonds, in prayers as spools or crosses of words, showing such a mastery of the natural movement of rhetoric that one is swept along on a hwyl of what seems at once natural and inspired speech.

Thomas's poems, with only a few exceptions like "The hunchback in the park", are not about a situation, or a person, or an action, or a view of the world, but about what it is to be Dylan Thomas involved in experiencing it; since his reactions are expressed with unbridled rhetorical energy, the 'hwyl' can anaesthetize the critical faculty of an impressionable reader:

The enjoyment of a poem is a kind of poetry in itself. Criticism to be of any value capable of growing has to spring from earth of a similar texture to that which went into the producing of the work of art . . . When confronted with poems like these, the ordinary conventions of reviewing simply collapse. There is nothing really to do but to sit back and enjoy oneself and to turn one's audience into the guests at a feast.\(^\text{105}\)

Uncritical rejection of the "ordinary conventions of reviewing" is unjustifiable: the attitude is an explicit continuation of Herbert Read's fallacy of "absolute poetry," a fallacy found in too many forms:

In this new volume of Dylan Thomas there are poems that well compare with any in the English language. He has come clear of a period of great promise into assured production of pure poetry. All that is left for the reviewer to do is to recognise it, to thank God, and pass on the good news,\(^\text{106}\)

and it reduces criticism to vague gestures about the indefinable:

Nobody writing in the English language today possesses in a like degree the sheer indefinable something that is the very essence and the very nature of pure poetry, not Auden, nor Campbell, not even Eliot, and certainly

\(^{105}\) Paul Potts, *Poetry Quarterly*, VIII (Spring 1946), 29.

\(^{106}\) S. Beryl Jones, see above, footnote 104.
not any other members of the generation immediately preceding his. Yet with all its simple yet magnificent splendour, with all its

for the whole
Of the sea is hilly with whales,

there is a suggestion of a lack of something, something that no other contemporary poet has in sufficient quantity to be of use to such pure poetry as this - but something which would perform in relation to this truly fine poetry, the function that varnish does to an oil painting. What that something is, is difficult to indicate, but it can be found in most of the world's literature that contains as much real art as can be found by the average reader in these poems.107

Criticism of this kind is bad because the reviewers are allowing themselves to be swept along by the force of rhetorical posturing and to be impressed by the poet's capacity for absorbing all things into his personality and stamping them with his unmistakeable mark; their responses are entirely subjective, being limited to a declaration of the impact of the poetry on themselves, and while it may sometimes be interesting to know how another reader reacts impressionistically, the criticism lacks the ability to say what a poem is about in terms of the verbal statement it is making, and of the experience observed and related. The criticism is thus limited because the poetry invites that kind of appreciation:

Mr. Thomas obliges us to contribute in appropriate emotional currency the price of his own promiscuous indulgence,

and too often lies beyond reason:

Mr. Thomas is both strong and representative, but he is one of those poets for whom experience lies hidden behind a heavy brocade of imagery, resisting the encroachments of both his own and the reader's reason; he blusters

107 Potts, see above footnote 105.
with fashionable freedom, and prodigally dissipates both light and heavy equipment.\textsuperscript{108}

It is a style of undiscriminating criticism which is stringently attacked by Wolf Mankowitz, and if he is too antagonistic, he debunks more thoughtfully than the standard of criticism deserves:

Such undeniably clever elaborations of subtlety as \textit{Deaths and Entrances} are not new to this darkened age and they do nothing to enlighten it. Their appeal is that of a new confusion to the already confounded and if there are enough readers whose minds are so habituated to the whirling muddle of modern existence that their poetry must be an omelette or nothing, then we suppose this to be just the sustenance for them. For our part these lucubrations without light, these esoteric and incoherent violences may serve, if they must, as one more of the stigmata of a mal-adjusted age but will certainly not receive our endorsement in any other way.\textsuperscript{109}

Mankowitz, in his \textit{Scrutiny} article, is quick to claim that the words of the poetry do not "appear to have any clear intention towards the reader" and concentrates his attack on how he considers the reader is merely invited to make an emotional response to poems which exist as highly elaborate structures, loosely but elaborately establishing vague emotional significance without presenting a verbal argument:

Mr. Thomas has developed several elaborate verse-techniques which have impressed many readers dulled by the fizz of loose current writing. Miss Sitwell . . . cautioned us - "Here alone among the poets of the younger generation is one who could produce sonnets worthy of our great heritage," and many intelligent writers have expressed their relief at the discipline and formal consideration which Mr. Thomas expends. However, while one is prepared to concede

\textsuperscript{108} Wolf Mankowitz, "Deaths and Entrances," \textit{Granta}, XLIX (March 8, 1946), 30.

that the careful internal rhyming, assonance, alliteration and technical lock, stock, and barrel of a poem like 'Conversation of Prayers' is no doubt conducive to the development of poetry as incantation; one is rather inclined to ask - its religious relevance apart for the moment - what the importance of incantation is construed to be by the poet. For though in the poem named a familiar sense of the general tragedy of things - particularly lovers and little children - is felt, it is difficult to follow the argument of the poem in terms of meaning.

He is aware of the effect on poetry and criticism of Thomas's emotional excesses, which is probably his reaction to the way many poems have a prodigality of images drawn to capture not the essence of the experience and observation of the poet, but to circumscribe his feelings, a method of composition which owes little to any objective correlation with areas of experience at least partially familiar to the reader:

Mr. Thomas is rich, and the fact that it is impossible to read more than a couple of pages of his writing without feeling quite certain about his richness indicates that he is prodigal as well. For Mr. Thomas is not afraid of adding image to image until the emotional content of his poems spills over and Mr. Read gasps "these poems cannot be reviewed, they can only be acclaimed."

Mankowitz wants to be made to think by a poem and is not content merely to observe a poet's emotional catharsis in which he may or may not be interested or involved:

Clearly it is difficult to think in the presence of the emotions generated by these poems, and perhaps soon the questioning of those emotions will be regarded as a sacrilegious action; for the rich effluence of Dylan Thomas is more than a little touched with religiose qualities. Mr. Thomas is likely to assume, with the help of acolytes critics, a priest-like position, the questioning of which will be regarded as heretical. The attaching of the emotions of religion to poetry again seems to have become a familiar procedure.

Thomas's lasting qualities could never include the importance of his insight into the human condition, but do include a considerable technical accomplishment which in a number of fine poems, was impressively subordinated to being the means of conveying and enhancing a visionary's perception of a natural world. There are few people in the poems, but he is at his best when

[His] ark sings in the sun
At God speeded summer's end
And the flood flowers now.

(Author's Prologue, p.ix)

Criticism is constantly brought back to discussion of technique, because so little needs to be said in explanation of Thomas's philosophy of life, and because it is as a lyric poet or a poet of celebration that he will be remembered. Criticism which only deals with technique as an analytical task, or with imagery as if exegesis was enough, is inadequate; technical analysis has to be related to the subject of a poem, what the poem is about, whether a theological dispute, or the isolation of the ecstasy of a moment's joy.

Mankowitz's position is quite common; he argues that technical mannerisms, incantation, 'attached' emotions, and arbitrary verse-forms are used artificially to inflate appearance while underneath the content is not adequate to the magnificent ornateness of the expression:

The lovers and children are recurring terms of what is already being called Mr. Thomas's "mythology". The children sleep, or are "king(s) of their six years" and are innocent — in fact, are, when the garish "mythological" decoration is stripped off them exactly what Mabel Lucy Atwell found them to be; and lovers weep, are mad, frustrated, tender, and so on, and are, in fact, exactly what the films, Shelley and Lord Tennyson have presented them to be. This is not to say that Mr. Thomas does not present situations of complexity. He does, but what is said is never proportional to the terrible difficulty he has found in saying it.
Although Mankowitz is not clear whether he is saying that Thomas deliberately complicates what is simple or that he genuinely finds difficulty in expressing his ideas, there is otherwise a telling accuracy in his criticism. It is less in what he objects to that his criticism is too severe, than in what he fails to show of Thomas's skill.

The most patently 'technical' poem of Deaths and Entrances is "Vision and Prayer," about which Mankowitz is scathing:

This poem is difficult, but mainly for the printer. It is an excellent example of the typographical conceits which seem to have lately come into fashion again, and this, arranged in diamond form or as "easter wings" — which no doubt makes it metaphysical — is surely a most preposterous case. Though it appears to have a number of key images, and its substance of birth and blood, and its general implications religious in a rather sensational way, — as if Mr. Thomas had suddenly discovered the birth and crucifixion all on his own — it presents such a welter of whatever slipped from the poetic tongue that the critical reader comes away with a sense of ripeness to the point of rottenness. An elaborate form again seems to have been imposed in the hope of preventing rotten tissues from falling apart ... It is an attempt which is not likely to succeed and in this case the weltering emotion is finally revealed as a most tedious demonstration of self-pity, and the Christ born, and the Christ crucified are realised to be unhealthy displacements of the writer. Needless to say this sort of indulgence is no Christianity, whatever emotions have been appropriated for private purposes.

Here he is taking issues with a romantic's approach to a religious theme, but the basis of his argument is occasionally unsound. The poem is not metaphysical because of typographical conceits but because of its subject and the treatment of it. Apart from this, the shaping into diamonds, hour-glass shapes and crosses is more than just a feat of printing. Thomas's vision opens in a "birth bloody room," the first half of the first section opening out to the longest line in harmony with the opening of the womb and the dropping
of the child. The diamond contracts as the vision concentrates on the child and a blessing is called down upon it, with the single word "Child" in the last line answering the single "Who" in the first. The expansion and contraction of the vision stanzas generally have some correspondence to what is being said, and similarly, the shaping of the prayers, quite apart from being the shape of a cross, effectively illustrate the narrative line of the poem. In the last stanza, for example, the poet has turned "the corner" of his prayer, and the central, isolated word is 'I'. The poem narrows to this word as the poet is uniquely found by the "loud sun" as it "Christens down/The sky." The expansion from the centre of the prayer corresponds to opening out of the speaker's soul, to the poet's being lost, not now in the narrow darkness, but in the width of the lighting of the "blinding/One." Finally, the fullest line ends the poem as "the sun roars at the prayer's end," a climax of sound and a weighty line to augment it.

The significance of the shape is not great, but it is wrong to dismiss the shaping as a trick. It is also misleading to object to the poet's identifying himself with Christ and to call it self-pity and non-Christian. Acquaintance with Christ's suffering is not confined to those who display stigmata, for it is found in many poets. In this respect, Thomas is more mediaeval than metaphysical:

In tene thai tirvit him agane,
And till ane pillar thai him band;
Quhill blund birst out at everie vane
Thai sourgit him bayth fut and hand,

(William Dunbar)

The universality of Christ is central to Christian belief and even if Mankowitz is right to suspect that Thomas is turning the identification
into an orgy of self-pity, he cannot be right to object to the
process of identification itself:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond.  (Gerard Manley Hopkins)

Though over-stressed and apparently blind to the merits of
Thomas's best poems, Mankowitz's criticism rightly demands much of
poet and critic. His critical attitude demands that a poem should
be a verbal communication of a definable subject, that the manner of
its expression be free from linguistic tricks or ornamentation and
that the communication should offer a subject that stimulates thought
rather than sets up an emotional atmosphere to be absorbed; he does
not approve of poetry which "is not functioning on a level of serious
intention." Whether he rightly rejects the poetry as "something of
a circus show," he is right to question the seriousness of any poet's
intentions, particularly of one who seems constantly aware of the
role of poet-entertainer, and right to challenge the "fabric" of the
poems by demanding to know why any word is being used. The
challenge is the more pertinent in the context of criticism which
consistently avoids the issue:

The magnificent utterance of Mr. Dylan Thomas is that of
an inspired, inspiring and unintelligible prophet. The
images of his poetry, as has often been said, correspond
to dream fantasies of a sexual type; he often imposes
order on his experience by using the language of religious
ritual. To analyse his poetry is nearly impossible, but
there is no difficulty in responding to it.111

And again,

111 Birmingham Post, April 2, 1946.
And if his full meaning escapes us, we can fall back for delight upon the richness of his imagery and music of his verse.112

Writers like these did not stop to ask vital questions as to what response can be made to an unintelligible prophet, or what the meaning of "richness" is when applied to imagery the full meaning of which escapes us. Mankowitz is too destructive, but he certainly demolishes much that is specious, making it easier to see what are the good poems and why they are good, and making us look to the critics for better guidance on what the poems' significance and values are.

The evaluation of the poems should properly begin with their themes, move on to the methods of presenting them, and end by discussing the merits of the poet's contribution to our total understanding and experience of life. In practice, it can lead to specious remarks about the poet himself:

The real importance of Dylan Thomas to us is not only that he is, with no apparent effort on his part, what most of us are trying to be, a real poet - but that he is the very salt of our lifetime, he belongs to these years, to these streets, to this place. He lives the same kind of life and earns the same kind of wages. How far away is Yeats; and even Eliot is just as far away, as the very life he leads,113

or into enthusiastic gestures towards the ineffable qualities of "true poetry":

...... here we are in an ocean of poetry and there is a spate of immense long rollers, huge-shoudered, transparent green with magic light, and foaming into billows of the purest snow of creation with the energy of an earlier age.114

113 Potts, see above footnote 105.
On occasion, a reviewer does loosely indicate what the poetry is about in terms of experience and insight:

At one time he was preoccupied in his poems almost exclusively with the themes of "birth, copulation, and death" (highly important themes, of course, as Mr. T. S. Eliot has indicated). His latest poems, on the other hand, evince an increased joy in, and power to portray, physical beauty.¹¹⁵

And occasionally one takes the trouble to define what the poems have to say:

The themes here are the great, elemental truths - love, death (what poignant dignity has the second poem, for a child killed!), and God; and the vision through which the poet explores these mysteries burns with the intensity of the sun. The oneness of all time, of all humanity - the lovers with "their arms round the griefs of the ages," the belief that "after the first death, there is no other" - is an idea which pervades the whole book. Mr. Thomas is as truly a religious poet as Donne, hammering out a name for the profound inner experience from his own highly individual idiom; and with this he couples, in such acutely observed images as "the sea-wet church the size of a snail with its horns through mist," as "the goose-plucked sea" or "the parables of sunlight and the legends of the green chapels" - a keen, sensuous awareness of beauty's outward forms.¹¹⁶

The poems are not profound, for Thomas is most adept at investing simple themes in grandeur and in the bright light of his vivid perception; a critic is consequently only able to state Thomas's themes in generalities:

Thomas's subject matter is simple; it is chiefly concerned with an individual awareness of the duality of birth and death. What he does with this primary idea is astonishing; he moves freely between the primitive and the Christian, transforming traditional symbols into personalised ones, or transferring symbols from one myth to another (i.e., the sun and Prodigal Sun, manna and the sacrament, etc.). Drawing on a wide knowledge of primitive ritual, psycho-analytical concepts, Christian, Welsh and magic legends Thomas continually discusses the body, sin, guilt, love and death.¹¹⁷


Whatever is said about theme, critical discussion invariably returns to the methods of conveying the highly personalized vision; Thomas's talent is to develop a unique perception of elemental themes in a subjective idiom. The more egocentric his vision, the more eccentric the idiom can be, because in a matter of entirely individual understanding, there is no impetus towards making the drift of a poem clear to anyone else. He never became an objective poet, one who writes out of personal observation and involvement but who steps back from the creation of the poem in order that the reader may get involved and whose presence is scarcely noticed. Nor did he become a poet who (other than seldomly) involves the reader in appreciation of the common and eternal passions of mankind. The reader is only expected to observe and understand the poet's reaction to a situation, not to feel passionately the common passions he shares as a man, as he can when reading Burns:

Ae fond kiss, and then we sever;
Ae fare weel, and then for ever!
Deep in heart-wrung tears I'll pledge thee,
Warring sighs and groans I'll wage thee;

or, when encountering the haunting sadness of Hardy:

I brought her here,
And have laid her to rest
In a noiseless nest
No sea beats near
She will never be stirred
In her loamy cell
By the waves long heard
And loved so well.

Thomas's strength is in the evocation of his own rather remote moods rather than in the distilling of human joy and grief into a universal essence that relates to the reader's experience.

Because the effective impact of his poetry depends upon how well
he creates atmosphere, mood, tone and so on, criticism is less concerned with the possibility of his expressing profound truths about the human condition than with his language; the clarification of his vision is measurable in terms of stylistic improvement:

The later poems are still concerned anthropomorphically with birth, growth, sex and death. But there has been a considerable change between his poems in 'The World I Breathe' and those written later. . . . The later poems have become more objectified, more precise in diction, more exact in imagery. This is particularly true when Thomas assumes the role of spectator of a particular place or occasion. ('Fern Hill' and 'On the refusal to mourn' [sic]). The startling rhetoric of the early poems cannot save some of them from overburdened symbolism and obscurity. The dense sexual symbols of the early poems have moved toward statement without losing richness of speech, or technical fluidity. 118

There is certainly a movement towards more direct statement of context as a result of the experience being imposed upon the poet instead of the earlier process in which the poet developed the experience out of an overcrowded and obsessive imagination. The events of the war were particularly important and did not go unnoticed, but not all critics were convinced of the supposed clarification:

. . . it need not be wondered then that they exhibit so fine a frenzy of image and emotion. Themes deriving from experience of fire raids on London, from observation of distraught love and from revivalist visions are wrought to near incoherence by the free play which Thomas allows his subconscious memories and the irrational associations with his lyrical impulse. When his surrealist idiom clears, however, the poet can truly claim to reach the most secret heart. 119

It is not surprising that a poet with a capacity for difficult

118 Howard Moss, see above footnote 117.
119 Britain Today, No. 121 (May 1946), p.43.
expression like William Empson should even have considered that a
development towards a clearer statement was not completely desirable:

Mr. J. L. Sweeney, in a well-informed introduction, says that "since 1940 and the air-raid poems Thomas has turned from the womb and the grave to the world of light; from the contemplation of the flesh and its declension to a metaphysical vision of resurrection". There is obviously some truth in this, but I am not sure that the change need be described so rosily. Anyone who starts bang off with a highly original and within its limits perfect technique is bound to have trouble in getting out of the limits; Dylan Thomas has been courageous in refusing to repeat his successes, and I expect this will pay in the end as it deserves to. But so far I like the earlier poems better. They have such concentration that they seem to be constructed of exploding bombs; and I think the secret of these brief passages is that Dylan Thomas has manoeuvred himself for them into a strategic point, like a mountain range from which the rivers flow opposite ways. 120

Amongst other criticism of Deaths and Entrances and Selected Writings there is much repetition, and the reviews are again of three main kinds: those which praise or berate without substantial criticism; those which deal with many issues of technique and without adequate consideration of what the poems express about man's experience; and those which aim for a balanced assessment of the whole poetry. The first is characterized by familiar but meaningless terms like "absolute" or "pure" poetry, and appeals to the indescribable magic of words (whether or not anything is said by them), or by dismissing it all, as Spender earlier did, as uncontrolled images poured out, as from a tap. The second kind can be as detailed but as remote from the totality of the poetry as this:

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It will be noted that there are but 24 poems in this little book. Yet the word Death, or part of the verb Die, occurs no less than 45 times. The word Water occurs 26 times, Sea, 29 times. Looking up, the heavens are equally symbolical; the word Sky makes 19 appearances, Stars, 16, and Clouds 14. But by far the most extraordinary of these repetitions is that of 'Birds,' for which he has something approaching an obsession... This word scours to a total of 37, in addition to which the following birds are mentioned by name: Heron, Seagull (3), Dove (2), Rook, Lark, Blackbird, Owl (2), Singingbird, Hawk (2), Duck-billed Platypus, Phoenix (3), Hen, Cock, Eagle, Duck (2), Nightingale (4), Nightjar, Pigeon, Goose, Wren (6), Swallow, Sparrow, Stork, Vulture. A little calculation produces the amazing result that in every single poem some sort of bird flies in 3.17 times.

The most important kind of criticism had by now begun to establish both the nature of Thomas's poetic achievement and its value; it shows, most helpfully for the reader, how Thomas's art is limited by its subjective remoteness from the reader while being skilled in the evocation of mood and the observation of nature.

**Deaths and Entrances** contained the best examples of Thomas at his best, but it is well to point out that not all of its poems achieve a similar clarity of expression and definition of theme. One can still encounter a poem in which images crowd out the lines and obscure the experience in a froth of words:

There where a numberless tongue
Wound their room with a male moan,
His faith around her flew undone
And darkness hung the walls with baskets of snakes,
A furnace-nostrilled column-membered
Super-or-near man
Resembling to her dulled sense
The thief of adolescence,
Early imaginary half remembered
Oceanic lover alone
Jealousy cannot forget for all her sakes,
Made his bad bed in her good
Night, and enjoyed as he would.

("Into her lying down head," p.113)

Poetry like this clogs rather than stimulates the imagination; in the dream vision images are densely packed, but as with any dream the lasting effect suffers from fading memories of unclarified images. Elsewhere, a poem can still astonish with the apparent complexity and prolixity of its imagery while the reader is left with no more than the vaguest notion of what it has all been about:

I see the tigron in tears
In the androgynous dark,
His striped and noon maned tribe striding to holocaust,
The she mules bear their minotaurs,
The duck-billed platypus broody in a milk of birds,
I see the wanting nun saint carved in a garb
Of shades, symbol of desire beyond my hours
And guilt, great crotch and giant
Continence. I see the unfired phoenix, herald
And heaven orier, arrow now of aspiring
And the renouncing of islands.
All love but for the full assemblage in flower
Of the living flesh is monstrous or immortal,
And the grave its daughters.

(Unluckily for a death," p.109)

The images here do not bear close analysis, but create associatively the central idea that the burgeoning of mortal life is the only reality ("the full assemblage in flower/Of the living flesh") and that love otherwise is monstrous or mythological. If you look too closely at the operation of the images, you ask awkward and distracting questions, perhaps about why the dark is "androgynous": darkness is more usually opposed to light than expressed as a dualistic form in itself, but it may be taken as one of many of Thomas's images expressing his own brand of Hegelian dialectic. The method leans heavily on the loose association of ideas so marked in the earlier volumes, and contrasts with the better poems of Deaths and Entrances in which images are refined and particularized to contain and convey precise ideas.
Thomas's growing ability to remain subjective but to interpret an existing world lived in by the reader, rather than to create a strangely remote world of phantasmagorical shapes, is nowhere more apparent than in "The hunchback in the park," in which he captures the loneliness and sadness of the misshapen creature, taunted by the cruel jibes of boys and haunted by a vision of a tall, elegant lover:

And the old dog sleeper

• • •
Made all day until bell time
A woman figure without fault
Straight as a young elm
Straight and tall from his crooked bones. (p.111)

He describes clearly but without rancour the cruelty of the boys who laugh at him "hunchbacked in mockery," but most powerfully describes the dignified suffering of the "solitary mister," humiliated by and alone with his deformity. The children at play contrast the old man's crookedness without the tone being maudlin. The whole situation is conceived with a compassion which can readily engage the reader's pity, and depicted with a sharp eye for the detail which distinguishes a special scene:

Eating bread from a newspaper
Drinking water from the chained cup
That the children filled with gravel
In the fountain basin where I sailed my ship,

and with a piercing sense of irony in the image of the "old dog sleeper" going to his kennel in the dark.

A similar emotional involvement of the reader is stimulated by "Do not go gentle into that good night," where the universality of the situation allows Thomas to generalise his particular grief:
Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.  

Although there are lines which puzzle, the whole poem is memorably simple in its expression of the frustrated anger of one who has to contemplate the approaching death of one so close as a father, and is particularly haunting in its repetition of the two key lines, "Do not go gentle into that good night" and "Rage, rage against the dying of the light." The treatment of death is much advanced in sentiment and expression from the horrors of the "maggots in the stool" and the "crooked worms" of Eighteen Poems, just as it is in the poems occasioned by the war. The evidence in them is that Thomas was raising the level of his discourse to incantation, being concerned with 'celebrating' the occasions without being adequately moved by the contemplation of human agony. Where his father's illness was close enough to subdue the customary grandiloquence of his utterance, the civilian deaths of London are too distanced for such a self-centred man to suffer with the victims. If he did suffer, the cathedral booming of his verse obscures it and suggests that he is too often striking a grand pose.

Yet the poems are striking monuments to the dead, and provided one does not make too stringent a demand for sincerity of feeling (while accepting that without it the poems are limited), they can be contemplated and admired for what they are. As a poetic monument, "A Refusal to Mourn" is magnificent: there are difficulties in syntax with the opening principal clause held back to the fourth line of the second stanza, but as in "After the Funeral," Thomas is able by this to develop a crescendo of images which both explain...
exaggeratedly how long it will be before he will mourn, and associate the one death with the ultimate judgement day:

Never until the mankind making
Bird beast and flower
Fathering and all humbling darkness
Tells with silence the last light breaking
And the still hour
Is come of the sea tumbling in harness

And I must enter again the round
Zion of the water bead
And the synagogue of the ear of corn
Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound
Or sow my salt seed
In the least valley of sackcloth to mourn

The majesty and burning of the child's death

He refuses to mourn, not just because he will not

blaspheme down the stations of the breath
With any further
Elegy of innocence and youth,

but also because his primary intent is to glorify the child's death and to present "many married London's estranging grief" through this and other poems.

While "A Refusal to Mourn" is often anthologized and is singled out by a number of reviewers of Deaths and Entrances, it is equalled if not surpassed by "Ceremony after a Fire Raid," which is mentioned less frequently. The title directs us to accept the poem as a ritual, and the language, tone and structure create the impression of a profane requiem mass.

I know not whether
Adam or Eve, the adorned holy bullock
Or the white ewe lamb
Or the chosen virgin
Laid in her snow
On the altar of London,
Was the first to die
In the cinder of the little skull.
Thomas assumes the role of the "grievers", thus depersonalizing the grief, and with the merging of the one death in the whole earth from Paradise to a London pavement, the poem progresses from the grief at the death of an innocent, through Old Testament ideas of sacrifice, and Man's fall from grace. He records the futile waste of the

Beginning crumbled back to darkness
Bare as the nurseries
Of the garden of wilderness,

and symbolically concentrates all forms of natural and religious life in the sacramental moment of the child's death. The churches, the four winds, the "urn of sabbaths" commingle with the "golden pavements laid in requiems" until in a final apocalyptic climax, the beginning and the end becomes as one:

Into the bread in a wheatfield of flames,
Into the wine burning like brandy,
The masses of the sea
The masses of the sea under
The masses of the infant-bearing sea,
Erupt, fountain, and enter to utter for ever
Glory glory glory
The sundering ultimate kingdom of genesis' thunder.

"Ceremony After a Fire Raid" is about a situation which did not involve the poet other than in contemplating it and charging it with significance, whereas "Fern Hill", is intimately grounded in his own experience. It is a radiant description of the nostalgic harking back to childhood which characterizes much of Thomas's later poetry, but it avoids the trap of sentimentality by tempering the radiance of the child's world with the adult's knowledge of the processes of time, and his interpretation of maturity as a fall from grace:
My wishes raced through the house high hay
And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows
In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs
Before the children green and golden
Follow him out of grace.

Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time would take me
Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of my hand,
In the moon that is always rising,
Nor that riding to sleep
I should hear him fly with the high fields
And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.

It is a well-wrought poem, which merits praise for both its expression:

The sap-driven power of the child who is a farm princeling
is expressed in language that has associations with the
shimmering youth and strength of The Song of Solomon,
and more especially for what its total and lasting effect is:

It also has lines so full of human longing and hiraeth
that it should be remembered long after the mechanics
of this age's poetry are forgotten.122

Although less profound than Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of
Immortality" with which it is often compared, it avoids this sort of
whimsicality:

Behold the Child among his new-born blisses,
A six years' Darling of a pigmy size!
See, where 'mid work of his own hand he lies,
Fretted by sallies of his mother's kisses,
With light upon his from his father's eyes!

The finest poem of the volume, and one of the best examples of
how Thomas could use his skill to use structure, imagery sound and
rhythm in a masterly way to form the vehicle of his thought, is

122 Dilys Rowes, "Place of Dylan Thomas in Modern Poetry,"
Herald of Wales, April 13, 1946, p.4.
"Poem in October." It shows how he could use an occasion to provide the stimulus and context of a poem and how he could be romantically introspective and still give the reader delight in partially sharing his experience. Because he is more settled in what he has to say, more established in his philosophical attitudes, his craftsmanship is completely subservient to the demands of the subject; there is less stylistic self-indulgence and consequently greater clarity. Close analysis will show the qualities of Thomas's work which are most lasting and which cause all but the most vehement of his detractors to qualify their dismissal of him.

The poem opens with the sounds of harbour and wood waking the poet and calling him out to an act of worship. His birthday is a step towards heaven, the shore is "priested" with heron, the water preys to him and the birds call to him to come out and celebrate the day. The morning "beckons" with the noises of the water, the seagulls, the rooks and the sailing boats bumping against the quay; in the "still sleeping town" these are the only sounds to disturb the stillness of the town still asleep. Sounds are matched with sights: the hard consonants of "call," "seagull," "rook" and "knock" which voice the sounds of morning, complement the visual patterns of the small boats moving rhythmically up and down at their moorings beside a jetty which is criss-crossed with fishing nets - "the net webbed wall." The water and the birds call him out immediately,

to set foot
That second
In the still sleeping town and set forth.

Thomas makes sure that the line divisions, arbitrary and disruptive as they may appear, contribute to the meaning, as in the isolation of
"That second" which emphasises the urgency of the call, the near rhyme with "beckon" associating the two words.

As he walks out into the early morning air, a mystical relationship between the scene and his birthday is suggested:

My birthday began with water -
Birds and the birds of the winged trees flying my name
Above the farms and the white horses
And I rose
In rainy autumn
And walked abroad in a shower of all my days.

The line division again contributes to the expression: by separating the two elements of "water-birds," Thomas reminds us in the first line that his birthday began with the "praying" water, and in the two lines together alludes to the birds of the sea which called him out.

He rises with the rising birds which fly his name, and walks in the rain which leads to the felicitous description of the "shower of all [his] days." The first part of the stanza has a rising movement which is contrasted by the downward sweep of attention in the second part as he turns back to himself

High tide and the heron dived when I took the road
Over the border
And the gates
Of the town closed as the town awoke.

This characteristic isolation of himself as the gates close is necessary, because as the town wakens to its normal life, it can no longer play a part in his solitary celebration of the birthday; it only involves the poet and the natural world. As he leaves the town, the vivid description of the scene shows his capacity for perceptive observation and evocative description:
A springful of larks in a rolling
Cloud and the roadside bushes brimming with whistling
Blackbirds and the sun of October
Summery
On the hill's shoulder.

The October setting makes the "springful of larks" unseasonal, but
"springful" also describes the upward spiral of the lark ascending to
the "rolling/Cloud"; the separation of "rolling" from "Cloud" gives
the idea of the larks "rolling" at the top of their flight; and the
isolation of "summery" underlines the paradox of a warm sun in
October while depicting the poet's mood, for he, the son of October,
feels "summery". Technique is clearly the servant of the thought.

Thomas establishes a remote perspective of man's social world
through images which diminish the town and illuminate his solitary
mood. "On the hill's shoulder," the weather is uniquely summery,
and he can look down on the "rain wringing/Wind" beneath him, and on
the "Pale rain over the dwindling harbour" where the church seems the
size of a snail. In the special weather on the spur of the hill he
is carried away into the memories of the past days of his childhood
when life was one continual summer: the weather turns and with it
the poet's thoughts:

And down the other air and the blue altered sky
Streamed again a wonder of summer
With apples
Pears and red currants
And I saw in the turning so clearly a child's
Forgotten mornings when he walked with his mother
Through the parables
Of sun light
And the legends of the green chapels

And the twice told fields of infancy
That his tears burned my cheeks and his mover in mine.

They turn with the weather to the legendary days of boyhood when all
the countryside was invested in holy splendour and communicated with
him. He captures these moments so clearly that he again feels
childish tears and empathy with the boy who is only a memory.

These surroundings had a mystic significance that is quasi-
religious; the "parables/of sun light" suggest the parables of the
Sun of Light, and the "legends of the green chapels" or the "twice
told fields of infancy" (reminiscent of the "fields of praise" in
"Fern Hill") relate to the Eden legend and imply the paradisial
innocence of childhood before the fall from grace. The boy lived in
joyful communion with nature:

These were the woods the river and sea
Where a boy
In the listening
Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy
To the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide.
The experience is more beautiful than Wordsworth's "coarser pleasures
of [his] boyish days,/And their glad animal movements." Yet
where Wordsworth progressed to hearing in Nature the "still sad
music of humanity," and to recognising nature as the "soul of all his
moral being," Thomas less profoundly recreates on this opportune
occasion the boyhood enchantment:

And the mystery
Sang alive
Still in the water and the singing birds.

Although Thomas recreates the sense of mystery, adulthood has altered
his perspective; where the boy was able to distinguish the details
of the mystery in the "trees and the stones and the fish in the tide",
the refinement is lost to the adult who sees "the woods the river and

123 William Wordsworth, "Lines composed near Tintern Abbey".
His re-creation of long-past joy is like the sudden glimpse of summer in the midst of autumn, a sudden touch of glory:

And there could I marvel my birthday
Away but the weather turned around. And the true
Joy of the long dead child sang burning
In the sun.

And as he stands rejoicing in this vision in the "summer noon" of the October day, Thomas closes his poem with a dedication to his poetic task:

O may my heart's truth
Still be sung
On this high hill in a year's turning.

While he regrets the passing of the childish vision and communion with the world, he is not unrealistically presenting this childhood world as better than the adult. It is different, but the adult has the advantage of being able to look back and see the magic in perspective and use it to look forward into the future with a sense of purpose. The difference between adult and childish perspective is shown in a movement from general to particular, the woods to the trees; the mysterious innocence, the grace of childhood invests each individual feature with significance. But as the detail is lost, the adult gains, for he can take in the whole perspective and as well, look to this special occasion when once more he can appreciate the child's particularized vision, refurbishing his imagination with a more restricted, but more finely textured outlook. In order to re-live a childhood mystery, he has to direct his thoughts inwards and isolate himself from the daily intercourse of the town, and so the detailed texture of his description in the first stanza became less clear until detail was lost as he closed
the gates of the town, and withdrew into himself to create the mood in which his vision could occur. The movement of the first four verses is towards a diminution of the awareness of normal adult human life and towards a heightened awareness of himself and his surroundings which stimulates the recapturing of the singing mystery of childhood. When the poet turns again in the last stanza to the adult world, it is with a renewed pledge and prayer for the future. This is no mere bathing in sentimentality, nor a retrogression towards childhood, for the poem is firmly directed forwards to a continuation of adulthood.

"Poem in October" is a good example of how Thomas was able at his best to direct his craft to the making of a poem whose imagery is hardly excessive and in which an impressive unity of form and content, word and meaningful purpose is achieved. It is a worthy representative of what is best in Deaths and Entrances and a vindication of the critics who have admired his lyrical ability and the radiance of his evocation of childhood. It is poems like "Poem in October," "Fern Hill," "A Refusal to Mourn," and "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" which made Deaths and Entrances such a striking advance on the previous volumes and which began to clarify the critical assessment of him as a highly skilled lyricist with a rare talent for words, a taste for the tone and vocabulary of myth and legend, and a simple vision to describe; and it is poems like these which make it difficult to understand the quantity of criticism which properly denigrates his wilful difficulty, his verbal obsessions, his histrionics but which allows of no exceptions. The following period, culminating in the publication of Collected Poems, shows that the latter type of criticism still abounded, despite the good writing which defines accurately the measure of Thomas's achievement and the value of his poetry.
CHAPTER FIVE

DOG AMONG THE FAIRIES

After the publication of *Deaths and Entrances*, the first notable critical event was the appearance of Henry Treece's book on Thomas. But the work was disappointingly disjointed and incomplete since it took note of *Deaths and Entrances* more or less as a postscript, whereas it should have informed the whole book with a sense of achievement. Parts of it had previously been published and were left largely unrevised, and there was too great a dependence on what Thomas said about his poetry instead of on what his poetry 'says'. During this period, the value of detailed textual analysis is being realised and is found to work well with Thomas's poems; the method involves poems as separate units and can appear to lack the breadth of the more traditional method of describing general principles and stylistic traits which predominate and which are drawn from the more immediate impact of poems in a group. William Empson pioneers the close explication of a poem and because much of the value of Thomas's poems lies in the form of expression rather than in the development of "ideas," the method is seen to promise to serve Thomas and reader well. Criticism of the second kind is more common, but usually reveals an incapacity to discuss other than in general and much-repeated terms, so that the same things are said over and again without much hope of extension or variation, a fault


125 The fault is not even properly rectified in the "fully revised edition" which was published in 1956.
which is directly attributable to the shortage of thought in the poems.

The simplicity and limitation of philosophical thought does not imply that the poems lack subject matter; on the contrary, poems are packed with experiences generally said to spring from romantic subjectivism. Stephen Spender comments on the way the poet's introspective vision involves a profusion of experiences which demands control and selection, but which too often results in a recording of "every vivid impression for which he can find a suitable image," of anything caught by a "kind of poetic roving camera"; the early poems were consequently obscure:

... they were poems written without any stronger principle of selection to guide the reader through the thick images and the loquacious sounds. They were often just collections of wonderful poetic insights, sustained by no unifying thought or experience behind them, as in the well known lines in memory of Ann Jones.126

Spender relates a movement towards a sense of theme with an improvement in his work which makes better use of his other qualities:

Words, rhetoric, violent imagery are obviously Thomas's virtues. He becomes also a colourist, a painter of the characteristic landscape of Wales and the West, who has affinities with Frances Hopkin and Chris Wood.

His implied regard for Thomas as a romantic poet is made explicit in his later articles, but romanticism is the basis of Glyn Lewis's account of the poet's turbulent imagery and attempt to release his inner forces:

Dylan Thomas or Alun Lewis remind us that we are more than or at least different from what we should like to appear to be; that we possess forces that need to be released, that the sublimation of this instinctive drive is a

torturing and anxious process . . . In Dylan Thomas this feeling of the necessity to release long ignored forces has helped to create the turmoil of his imagery: it is the very motive of his writing verse. For him the act of poetic creation is the means of making conscious these outlawed and unrecognized powers, to raise them to the point where reason can formulate them.127

Lewis is influenced by Thomas's declared intention to release the "hidden causes" and although he appreciates a "sense of separation from the past with the same sense too of a new life waiting to clothe the world with a green freshness" and a need to find security in an insecure society, he accurately relates the sense and the need to romanticism rather than the modernism it could superficially resemble:

In periods of insurrection and cultural revolution the values and the standards by which men had lived, and which had provided for them a stability, a delicate equilibrium in the chaotic welter of experience, are cast down, and in consequence man is thrown upon himself; with the result that in the 17th Century, in the Romantic period, and in our own age, light has become psychological, reason is subject to vitality, to intuition, to spontaneity.

He mentions the poetry's introspection and its frequent reversion to the "cult of childhood" as being amongst its affinities with the early Romantics, but gives his ideas a modern flavour by analysing the reversion in Freudian terms:

For in him the almost pathological concern with the sea, the ever-present imagery drawn from the vast undifferentiated mass of ocean, is explicable in the terms of Freudian analysis, and Freudian interpretation of dream symbolism, only on the assumption of a narcissistic introspective attitude, a desire to return to the undifferentiated womb of the unconscious.

Many of the defects of the early poems were caused by the limitations such an attitude places on the universality of the poetry's signifi-

cance: where poetry is merely an insight into the peculiar difficulties of one inadequately adjusted man it remains limited in value compared with poetry, just as introspective, which explores difficulties shared by men because they share the same social and cultural environment. Lewis's condemnation of an "exaggerated and vitiating solipsism" is well-merited provided it is countered by emphasis on the way later poems show "more and more windows upon the common world."

Even though Lewis writes of a division between Thomas and the world, it would be wrong to take this as a sign of his modernism, for what division there is is caused by a failure to derive a coherent and sustaining philosophy from a world of nature which takes little account of the state of modern society. As such it is a romantic failure; if anything drove Thomas into a "cult of childhood" (a term that is unacceptably belittling) it was that in adult reconstruction of the child's vision of nature he could find a coherent attitude that was more satisfying to contemplate and less terrifying than an adolescent vision. The persistent vision of the first three books could only have led to the poet's destruction because it was conducive only of a schizoid failure to impose a sense of order and purpose on his life. It may be that Thomas's failure to lead a responsible life and his eventual destruction as a man was the result of his living the early nightmare while he was only able to escape from it in poems like "Fern Hill" where he imaginatively recaptures the lost grace of childhood. It is of little consequence that no child lived such a glorious life, for the important point is that it is the adult's craving for order that reconstructs what can only be an adult conception of a remembered but enhanced youth. The period
which inspired *Eighteen Poems, Twenty-Five Poems* and *The Map of Love* might be considered as a terrifying perspective on a peculiarly morbid aspect of reality, out of which he has developed partly through the growth of interests beyond the immediate concern for the self, and partly because his insight could not be sustained without endangering his entire personality. From the development are derived two kinds of poem, found in *Deaths and Entrances*, those in which we see a wider concern for the 'common world' and other people, and those in which he seems to be evading the fearful prospects of a return to the adolescent vision by creating a visionary world of near fantasy in poems of childhood like "Fern Hill" or legendary mock-ballads as in "Ballad of the long-legged bait" and near-myths like "A Winter's Tale."

Thomas only rarely achieved and demonstrated a settled and orderly attitude to life, so that he often seeks to avoid the real horror of his earlier contemplations; this is not just a matter of theme, for in the periphrastic composition of his poems he may be avoiding a more direct expression because he cannot face the reality he would then be describing. But there is no reason for attacking him as viciously as does Geoffrey Grigson:

> It is a debasing of the debased; and yet Mr. Thomas's poems, these poems which might have been written by a half-conscious lunatic Swinburne or Housman, have a deceptive personality, one which appeals to those who read only for novelty's sake: it is a personality of eruption. Images, solipsist images for the most part, of the mud, or highly mixed with the mud of personality, bubble up as through a volcanic, mephitic mudhole, and then sprawl shapeless and half shaped around the page. A word, as I have indicated, attracts another word by suggestion of sound with no better 'reason why the thing
is at all, and why it is there and then, rather than elsewhere or at another time, and these solipsist images of non-sense or near-sense, these fortuitously conjoined words, these poems smeared vaguely with womb, bride-bed and death, have about them a novel suggestion of the strange, the magical, the profound, whereas their strangeness is little else than black magic, their profundity little beyond the indiian-ink deepness of an individual.128

His article is uncompromisingly vituperative, but lacks a counter-argument to make a balanced criticism. He mainly attacks Thomas on method, but he is obviously basing his criticism on his belief that Thomas does not have anything valuable to express even if one were able to wade through the slush and mud of cloying images:

Analysis in fact discovers a tedium of repeated mess from which only few poems are free. And the quality of rhymes is often low, lazy and again an offence to the ear. When just, much of the rhyme is of the conventional collocation, stately used, of truth-youth, death-breath, eyes-skies, head-bed, ways-days; when the rhymes are near rhymes, they are often singulars with a plural, sometimes words together of the wrong weight or accent, rubbish-wish, barley-away, animals-crawls, etc.; and most often such pairs as come-plume, good-cloud, tears-stars, ice-face, trouble-fossil, wizened-glistening.

Here Grigson is being merely perverse, for he criticises the means of poems without enough reference to the quality of experience expressed and the memorability of the way of expressing it. In particular, his fault is to judge Thomas's half-rhymes by what they are not; there is no point in complaining that half-rhymes are not full rhymes when the critics task is to describe what kind of rhymes, if any, a poet uses and to what effect. His standard must be what

128 Geoffrey Grigson, "On a Present Kind of Poem," Polemic, No. 7 (March 47), 52. See also his "How much me now your acrobatics amaze," in Harp of Acolus which is closely similar to this article.
is significantly achieved (even if only a pleasing sound pattern), not what other methods might have been used.

Grigson's complaint is based on his belief that there is a lack of organizing control; he contrasts Tennyson's order with Thomas's chaos:

The type of poems written by Tennyson has normal lucidity of syntax, consistency of form and cohesion of music. It is formal, considered, worked over; that is, carefully and critically written. What such poems convey they convey within the bounds of image, and ornament, and experience available to most readers:

Calm is the morn within a sound
Calm as to suit a calmer grief
And only through the faded leaf
The chestnut pattering to the ground.

One knows that the first group of four lines will remain to the end; one knows, as well as Tennyson, the sound of pattering chestnut, dews, gossamers, reddening leaves, the sea, swaying waves, and calm. Many things, not all to his credit differentiate a poem written by Tennyson from one written by Blake or Burns, or Dryden or Rochester, or ... or ... or a Maria Cond tribesman in the Bastar jungles, but the type is outwardly the same; and over all its variations two things distinguish the type, cohesion of music (or a planned rhythm) and control by the intellect; control which may or may not extent to what the poem concerns, but which does certainly determine the ordinary rhythmical way in which the poem is told.

Although by all accounts, Thomas "worked over" his poems with considerable care, they do not give that impression to Grigson:

The type of Mr. Thomas's poems is the psychological curiosity, without as much sense as one can find in 'Kubla Khan', and without its music; so long as one interprets music as something more exciting and subtle than sounds in a low degree of order. A degree of order there is, a degree of control by the intellect, will to end lines at a certain length, to arrange them in groups; and in the decision at some time to stop the poem from running any further.

He rarely finds any "construable sense" but instead looks to "such
qualities as order and music" for evidence of control, examining rhythm, form and "power to rhyme" in Deaths and Entrances.

He objects to disjointedness of rhythm, saying that lines frequently "break from an established run into an unrhythmical, unrelated flatness": a scheme forms only to break down into formlessness:

One can find no reasons in art for these sudden changes from wire into paste which awkwardly flattens and lengthens out as from a tube:

My holy lucky body
Under the cloud against love is caught and held and kissed
In the mill of the midst
Of the descending day, the dark our folly
Cut to the still star in order of the quick

Something again established, rhythmically, if clumsily;
and then, again, the break:

. . . In the mill of the midst
Of the descending day, the dark our folly
Cut to the still star in order of the quick
But blessed by such heroic hosts in your every
Inch and glance that the wound . . .

Thomas is so variable that it is easy to select quotations to suit almost any facet of opposing arguments. It is partly his own responsibility, for the poet who writes very badly at times encourages the antagonistic critic to dwell on the evident defects and also to impute these defects to all the poems, a dishonest practice but one all too often seen. It is right, however, to demand that the critic relate his technical criticism to the total impact of the poem, which Grigson fails to do. He does not even indicate where in the lines quoted the break occurs and how it relates, or fails to relate to the sense. His comments on rhyme are seen to be based on the false assumption that you judge rhyme by an absolute standard of correctness; when he does refer the technique to the poem it is in
terms too vague to be meaningful, such as when he says that "A Winter's Tale" begins with an "easy pattern of ababa, which asks and needs to be maintained for the poem's health and wholeness" but which suddenly "breaks into an ababc and into ababa once more, with no justification, and nothing but offence to the ear." It is a remarkably sensitive ear which registers an occasional line as being different from a scheme 'established' in the first verse and an insensitive mind which makes of it more than a possible slip which does not affect the impact of the words. Thomas only uses half-rhyme in order to impose a pattern of sound and to draw together by sound words which are related in sense but separated in the word order, as in "Conversation of Prayer" where the crossing of the rhymes underline the transference of the prayers:

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

Grigson's criticism places far too much emphasis on technique when he has not settled upon a coherent attitude to what the poems are about, other than nothing. When he says that "Mr. Thomas's rhyme where only non-sense and mess are to be conveyed is un-emphatic ornamental filling," he reveals his basic fault: there is no purpose in discussing method of expression if you are convinced that nothing has been expressed other than to establish why there is a communication failure. He achieves nothing by discussing rhythm and rhyme, or by dismissing any particular technique in slick journalist:
There is a species of film commentary which will stop, for example, to explain the making of tea chests for an eastern tea garden, and continue. "Talking of chests, here is the hairiest chest in the world," and the film flicks from India to the hairy paps of an all-in wrestler from Saskatchewan wrestling at Blackpool. Commentator, film director and Mr. Thomas are brothers in poetry.

He is more sure of himself when he generalises more on what he sees as Thomas's failure to be as mindful of the 'universals' of poetry as Tennyson and his falling into the ways of those who have something to say but who "despise or do not know the means of refining it and saying it." He is not clear as to what these "universals" are, and it is unwise to demand universality from a poet so intimately concerned with personal response to a narrow experience; as he did with rhyme, Grigson is objecting to Thomas's poetry because it is not good at being a kind of poetry to which it does not correspond:

One may say that Tennyson's is a half poetry because Tennyson's knowledge of the best is not full or complete owing to a refusal to look at the worst. He may also be halfway to mistaking the art of poetry for the whole of poetry, he may have lived too much within literature. Poetry of Mr. Thomas's type goes beyond living in literature, by living outside literature (and outside nature in all its senses), goes beyond mistaking the impulses and origins of poetry both for the art and for the whole. It is the end of nearly two centuries of sanctifying the first impression, the illumination; of finding high value in the production of the child's impulse to art, though children (and 'primitives' in the sense of the uneducated artist) do not write "Iliads" or a "Divine Comedy", or paint a Sistine "Adam and Eve."

Apart from being a cumbersome way of saying that Thomas does not write poetry (for there is nothing else meaningful in the sentence beginning "Poetry of Mr. Thomas's type . . ."), all this amounts to is that Thomas is neither Virgil nor Dante and that his work is of a different order: it is surprising that Grigson does not note that Thomas's poems are therefore not susceptible to the same critical
standards or approaches. His failure is to be flexible enough to treat variable work according to differing criteria.

Apart from tracing a tenuous connection between what Wyndham Lewis called the 'diabolical principle' in poets like Lautréamont, and what he calls the 'demi-diabolism' of Thomas, Grigson does not say much about what Thomas tries to communicate; instead he concentrates on attacking the method and the impulse of the poetry as being

precisely that being-too-personal which Mr. Auden rejects, that interpretation of the signs and symbols of art, not as communication, but as psychological expressions which Coleridge rejected, . . . since it is as if "the artist had nothing better to do than to make an exhibition of himself to his neighbour." The self-adulation, the insolence in believing the importance to others of the unravelling of one's own spirit or the record of one's individual struggle! Art as the peeling off of ten pairs of drawers!

It is unremarkable that he criticizes aspects of the poetry which are widely suspected by critics, but regrettable that he indulges in such unsympathetic, polemical journalism. Good criticism, especially if adverse, does not come from contumely, for the critic is too exasperated in tone to sound as if he writes through reason. The sum of Grigson's article is that Thomas did not have the control needed to organize what he had to say, and that what he wanted to express lacked the selection which derives from discernment of what is worth exposing. He accepts the place of the "hypnotic" poem which "effects by its order, by its music, by its suggestiveness, a statement of harmony, repose and receptivity," but claims that Thomas was unable to achieve such harmony.

Extreme criticism is provocative because it is exasperating and because it is usually easy enough to qualify its extremeness. Glyn
Lewis, directly in response to Grigson, argues that Thomas did have something to say and that his manner "conforms to the tradition of the English language." In explaining his regard for Thomas, he places him in the mainstream of modern writing, not so much influenced directly by surrealism, but rather developing a way of conceiving art, of which the surrealists are an extreme example:

For the group is only an extreme manifestation of what is the climate of European writing, and few writers have effectively avoided its influence . . . Its main characteristic is its refusal to accept the conventional logical forms of the past to insist upon a more penetrating and incisive glance at existence, and so "it speaks with the vocabulary of the great vital constants, sexual instinct, feeling of death, physical notion of the enigma of space."

He believes that the aim of such poets is to "jump out of the shadow of customary and habitual perception into the vivid and vitalising sun of novel and unusual experience," to which end they move in "strange regions of the mind," a very dissimilar activity to the constant discipline of the world of objects demanded by Grigson. When he describes Thomas's verse as an "activity of the spirit," the "process of discovery itself" as in major poets like Wordsworth, Shakespeare, Milton and Keats, or minor ones like Donne, Herbert and Vaughan, he is both inferring Grigson's failure to be responsive to the poetry's varying qualities and implicitly providing us with the essential difference between Thomas's romantic desire to create significance in his life from inspired observation and analysis of his environment and the surrealistic intention to create a new order of reality. He considers Thomas's discoveries to be religious in a

paradoxical way:

Thomas's is a "religious sense of profane existence": it is imbued with an intense, sometimes a precociously and hysterically intense feeling of the unity of all forms of existence, without at the same time a realisation that the unity of existence has its reason in the nature of God and the person of Christ, as we find in devotional, mystical, or metaphysical Christian poetry.

To sense religious significance is to recognize an order in the world which is not created by the poet, but appreciated; this is one vital distinction between Thomas and the surrealists.

Thomas's early weaknesses included an inability to synthesise the opposites in his imaginative interpretation of life; or, when he expressed the "unity of all forms of existence," a realisation of the horrifying nature of the unity (a weakness because horror is not a satisfactory response even if it appears inevitable to the poet). Lewis appropriately shows that Thomas was inspired by a desire to be drawn into the cosmic unity and his "sense of the unity of man with the vast processes of nature, and the identity of all forms of life," but he could have been more specific about the limitations of such subject matter. Yet when he refers to "this adolescent emphasis on the need for absorption within some usually unspecified and vague 'One'," and describes the poet's motivation as "a symptom of infantile regression, an unconscious desire to revert to the state of existence with the womb, a more or less undifferentiated existence in which individuality is eroded by the vast wave of the 'one spirit's plastic stress'", he is describing the most powerful argument against valuing the early poems highly for the significance of their insight into human experience. Lewis insists that Thomas was aware of the limitations of "solipsistic subjectivism," notes his sense of
"division, fear and anxiety", and reminds us of the modernist dilemma which underlies it:

In an age of traditional conformity the young poet would have at hand a set of conventional themes that he would certainly modify but that would nevertheless ensure continuity with his predecessors, and provide for adequate communication with his readers. In the past such themes were indicated by ancient mythology, the Bible story or the legends of British heroes. In a revolutionary period such as this not only are values questioned, but conventions are discredited; so that the poet is thrown back upon his own inventions for the embellishment of his theme, and more important, for the creation of any theme at all.

Lewis's comments on the early poems are sound if not startling, but do not answer the real objections underlying Grigson's criticism; it is only by extending his enquiry to the later poems that he approaches an answer, and incidentally shows the serious flaw of criticism which had failed by this time to throw off assumptions based on reactions to the early poems:

The first stage of this development occurs with "Ann Jones" and its most mature expression is in the poetry of 'Deaths and Entrances'. In these poems we are conscious of a more dramatic utterance, of a greater concern with other men and women and with other children; with a living social background. For this development there may be several reasons: one of the most compelling is the recent war and its bombardment of cities, an event that forced men to share a common experience of inexorable urgency. It has an immediacy that a realisation of the existence of God had for our fathers, and still has for those fortunate enough to possess it. This common experience created an impulse towards community and it broke down psychological barriers subsisting in the past upon social cleavages and classes. This impact, however, is as momentary as it was violent, and it has no power to sustain the effect it produced. In addition this wartime experience is born in an atmosphere of fear and anxiety rather than love and hope, and there is little poetry of magnitude which has lived and fed on such an impulse. The interesting question that
this poet's future productions will answer is whether the development towards a more objective and dramatic poetry socially orientated and therefore to my way of thinking more in the tradition of Christian literature than the less dramatic, lyrical and somewhat pantheistic early writing, has been maintained.

This is not startlingly original, but his essay is a measured appraisal of Thomas's weaknesses as well as a hopeful estimation of his future which takes into account the latest published poetry. Yet it does not give a sufficiently positive assertion of the poetry's value to be an adequate counter to the kind of adverse criticism of Grigson or Mankowitz in Scrutiny.

Mankowitz is taken to task by John Parry at this time, and the argument can be equally applied to Grigson's destructive criticism; he begins by questioning the status of the critic in his relationship with the artist:

The argument may perhaps be advanced by recalling a footnote to one of Eliot's essays. In this note three levels of critical approach are indicated; the first (which need not detain us) is roughly that of the naive seeker after news and sensation, the second that of the enthusiast who has reached but not passed the stage at which he identifies himself with the author, while at the third level a detachment is won which permits the reader to accept each writer for what he has to offer. This condition in Eliot's view is attained by very few readers and by no means all critics. A development of these notions of identification and objectivity will, I think, clarify our understanding of Thomas's admirers and detractors.130

Developing the idea of identification, he sensibly accepts that "where there is a real temperamental affinity between critic and artist the resultant product will often be invested with unusual insight," and further argues that a 'negative identification' can

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130 John Parry, "Scrutiny and Re-scrutiny," Polemic, No. 7 (March 1947), p. 44.
occur and provoke hostility against a given poet, when the

glorification of one artist is frequently accompanied by ruthless repudiation of others. While there are undoubtedly occasions when it is a critic's duty to crack and crack hard, whole-hog iconoclasm at the expense of the eminent can rarely be validated and when it occurs we shall be well advised to consider the possibility of that negative identification which Eliot had in mind when he warned against asking the impossible of the artist.

His association of Mankowitz with 'negative identification' could equally apply to Grigson, but the principle itself must be held in doubt as an adequate explanation of their opposition:

Our reviewer's rejection of THOMAS and his poems is so downright and proceeds from such a complete failure to grasp the poet's intention that a negative identification must be suspected. What this can be due to it would be idle to guess, but there are many features in THOMAS'S work which might promote a strong resistance. His interest in sex, his interest in religion, his archetypal imagery, his prodigality, the difficulty of his poems, his high emotionality, possibly an undue balance in his modes of perception (high visceral, relatively low visual imagery) - all these come to mind and there may well be as many more.

"Downright rejection" more evidently comes from a straightforward dislike of what Thomas had to say and his manner of saying it, an attitude compatible with Eliot's third 'stage': critical detachment and acceptance of a poet for what he has to offer.

Neither critic convinces that he has considered carefully enough all the poetry available; they show small sympathy for the poet, but this derives from Grigson's error in condemning the verse for not being a good example of what it patently does not resemble.

Mankowitz demands a far higher degree of control in organization and a greater seriousness of purpose. Their criticism is imbalanced but committing the 'intentional fallacy' would not change
it; they are, in their own very different ways, concerned to observe an apparent lack of essential standards and overstate their case.

Mankowitz is also concerned that such self-indulgence should have attracted a 'cult' of admirers and blames Thomas for being partly responsible for a debasing of artistic values and standards. It is arguable how far a poet is responsible for what his public makes of him, but as a skilled 'persuader' he must be partly responsible for the effects he causes. That Thomas's poetry attracted the effusions of Edith Sitwell and Herbert Read (which are complimented by Parry), the denigration of Mankowitz and Grigson, and the weird ramblings of the cranks is largely his own doing: the adult, whether poet or not, is responsible for his own actions and statements and Thomas doubtless invited such a range of reaction through the strangeness of his subjects and the eccentricities of his style. That he finally attracts sensible criticism is also his own doing and is invited by the not inconsiderable merit of some of his poetry.

Parry was on uncertain ground in guessing the motivation of other criticism, and shows greater limitations when he reduces the specific charges laid by Mankowitz against Thomas to a crudely simplified level:

These sentences suggest that the writer had run his head against three problems:

1. The meaning of each poem cannot be grasped from line to line but is laid bare only when the whole poem has been read.
2. The meaning when attained turns out to be some highly coloured emotional state, the experience of which is rather like 'a blow on the head.'
3. The parts of the poem when studied yield nothing to analysis - it is implied that the reason for this is because the aim of each poem is primarily emotional.
In dealing with the first point, he writes that withholding meaning is characteristic of modern poetry since 1917 because of a dramatic change in our consciousness:

Our awareness of objects is always a stage ahead of our awareness of relationships, with the result that the first things we paint, carve, or write about are things. Perception of relationships is of course implicit in all imaginative effort, but there are two levels at which it can operate. Until about thirty years ago the poetic imagination operated almost exclusively at the first level, that is to say a poem would be 'based' on an object (e.g., a solitary reaper) and the purpose of the poet would be to communicate chiefly by simile and metaphor the thoughts and feelings aroused thereby.

This is not only an untouched comment on the nature of English poetry but also indicates a naive view of the function of metaphor as if merely a matter of expressing one thing in terms of another. He continues to write around the real concerns of criticism, as when he describes how it can be possible to suppress explicit reference to the subject of the poem:

Where this happens the statement of the poem's theme may well be indistinguishable from its development, that is to say the poem will progress by a series of alternating references to A in terms of B and to B in terms of A. Even this account is an over-simplification for it implies that a poem will be based on one metaphor alone. In fact it is not unusual to meet poems that are based on more than one metaphor or even on a metaphor deduced from a constellation of sub-metaphors.

All this amounts to is a cumbersome way of agreeing with Auden's assertion: "How can I know what I think till I see what I say?"

In dealing with emotional states in poetry, Parry evades the real problem of establishing the function of emotion in poetry: Disagreeing with Mankowitz's opinion that "whereas elements of cognition do not necessarily fuse, emotions can be added together like numbers," he claims that emotion is illogical and "the means
by which it is excited defy analysis." We are told to avoid rational discussion because his poems are beyond consciousness:

If THOMAS'S poems must be compared to anything let it be to the dream, that experience of emotional import which makes and masks its communication by means of cognitive mechanisms ... What THOMAS does is to employ the form and mechanisms of the dream so that they enlarge our experience.

Parry avoids answering Mankowitz and limitedly asks us to respect the emotional import of dreams when dealing with poetry which had by then developed a long way from dependence on the structure and unreal qualities of dreams. He is able to dismiss the third problem, that the poems defy analysis, by objecting to such a demand being made of poetry designed to "evolve a fantasy state" the "undulating rhythm" of which is "hardly a medium for the birth of sharply articulated noonday imagery." In the end, having avoided taking real issue over the points raised by Mankowitz, he exaggeratedly objects to his manner:

Towards the end of the article the writer becomes too exasperated to stoop for fresh sticks with which to pursue the castigation. GODWIN, SHIBURNE, AUDEN, Australian aborigines and SPENDER - all are snatched at in a crescendo of denunciation at the peak of which the figures of Mr. THOMAS and CHATTERTON are hurled on to a garishly flood-lit screen. I don't know what sort of dizziness this 'emotional logic' has induced in others, but it has led me to 'the not unimportant consideration of why the blow was administered at all.'

Mankowitz is excessive in his dismissal of Thomas, but nowhere is his writing as hysterical as this would suggest: "the blow" was administered because in the praises awarded to the poet, critics like Mankowitz see a debasing of critical standards in the loosely formulated acceptance of poetry of doubtful value. He was undiscriminating, doubtless, but his serious objections are in no wise
met by an appeal to generalities of aesthetic appreciation such as Parry's.

The to and fro of critical dispute can be sterile, but can reveal something about a poet because of the qualities which make it possible for there to be serious disagreement. The very fact that Thomas could seriously be accused of being a charlatan shows the questionable integrity of some of his methods, and an assault on the growth of a 'cult' shows the element of the showman, the public entertainer in Thomas which was as much a feature of his poetry as of his lecture tours. In no other criticism is there such evidence of a response to the 'showman' than in Edith Sitwell's, as if the price paid by Thomas for making poetry a public performance was to attract those whose predilection was for a similar kind of criticism:

"Sir George Beaumont," said Coleridge, in 'Anima Poetae', "found great advantage in learning to draw through gauze spectacles."

I do not know if Coleridge was intending a gibe. But in any case, no better portrait could be given of a dilettante. The amateur almost invariably softens and blurs.

A great deal of the verse that is published today is hopelessly amateurish and the authors seem to have tried to learn to see (they rarely succeed in doing so) through gauze spectacles.

It is very natural that people so occupied, people who spend their lives in measuring "the irregularities of Michael Angelo and Socrates by village scales - in short "les apotres du petit bonheur", should be scared by - should distrust - Dylan Thomas.

In my 'A Poet's Notebook' I have a quotation about the painter who paints a tree becoming a tree.

This condensation of essence, this power of 'becoming the tree', is one of the powers that makes Mr. Thomas the great poet he is. His poems appear, at first sight, strange. But if you heard a tree speak to you in its own language, its own voice, would not that, too, appear strange to you?
In the essay 'Nature' (Tiefurt Journal 1782) Goethe wrote: "She [Nature] has thought, and she broods unceasingly, not as a man, but as Nature ... she has neither language nor speech, but she creates tongues and hearts through which she speaks and feels ... It was not I who spoke of her. Nay, it was she who spoke it all, true and false. Hers is the blame for all things, hers the credit."

Mr. Thomas also, is a poet through whom Nature speaks. In all the dramatic gesturing, she makes a few pertinent comments on "We lying by seashand" (p.82), but fails to cause the analysis of particular images to cohere into a description of the experience, and similarly mentions "A Refusal to Mourn":

In that great poem, 'A Refusal to Mourn', with its dark and magnificent, proud movement, we see Death in its reality, as a return to the beginning of all things - as only a robing, a sacred investiture, in those who have been our friends since the beginning of time:

The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother -

(Bird, beast and flower have their part in the making of mankind, and in their root. The water drop is holy, the ear of corn a place of prayer. The all-humbling Darkness itself is a begetting force. Even grief, even tears, are a begetting ... though here this life must not come into being - (as a rival, perhaps, to the dead child). The stations of the breath are the stations of the Cross.

I do not know any short poem of our time which has more greatness.

Her analysis gestures broadly and inaccurately (a careful look at the syntax shows that bird beast and flower are 'fathered' by the same darkness as mankind), and here 'evaluation' is an isolated expression of personal opinion.

Edith Sitwell's article in The Critic is companion to a less grandiloquent and more adverse treatment of "A Refusal to Mourn",

131 Edith Sitwell, 'Comment on Dylan Thomas,' The Critic, I (Autumn 1947), 17.
in which the necessity for such complex thought and feeling is questioned:

My point is that the 'last light breaking' theme is more appropriate to the deep emotional disturbance that Mr. Thomas feels rather than to any situation or experience which he may consider himself to communicate. It allows him two stanzas of impressive and evocative prophetic caworting; it provides a license for all the eternity imagery a romantic poet might care to indulge. Mr. Thomas leaves no emotive corner unturned. Every word is richly suggestive and though one can only describe the atmosphere evoked as 'poetic', one would hardly be inclined to regard the word in this case as definitive of poetry.132

Gibson's reaction is based on his assumption that the poem must communicate a situation or experience (which it must), but he does not accept Thomas's emotional disturbance as the experience. The poem is a memorial of a kind, a personal celebration of death through the reaction to that death, and as this inevitably lacks universality, the poem is limited. The experience need not be something happening (a defective usage of the word) and it is Gibson's application of a narrow idea of the possible content that leads to this familiar kind of criticism:

Just as, when stripped, the first half of the poem reveals a remarkable poverty of sense for so rich an emotionalism, so does the second half, when rendered down, leave only the most usual Georgian 'one-with-nature' sentiment. Now the Georgians had many faults but at least they could pride themselves upon their ability to be simple with becoming simplicity. Mr. Thomas puns and mixes with the most advanced company since the Surrealist exhibition, he takes liberties with language which only the genius of a Manley Hopkins could justify, he flashes and gestures yet what he has to say has been said already and many times by men he would never wish to emulate.

In short, a poem has to 'say something' and so the massing of images

and the accumulative style are subordinated in such criticism to something to be "stripped" in order to expose the "sense", when in truth the disturbed imagery, the religious allusions and the grandiose style are integrated expressions of the experience, of this monument to the disturbance caused in the poet by the child's death. Thus the emphasis of Gibson's comments is misplaced, and the use of words like "argument" ill founded. He raises more questions than he answers:

He writes under the influence of a purely personal (though quite public) inspiration, and the confused emotional statement may stand for the usual 'sensitive' reaction to 'significant' experiences in both Mr. Thomas and the contemporary public for romantic writing. The concluding line of the poem with its smart consciousness of ambiguity winds up a typical peroration on death with a popular suggestion of resurrection, thus clinching the religiose argument of the poem.

It is not clear what the poem is typical of, what he means by the "popular suggestion of resurrection," or even what form of inspiration there is other than personal for the very personal act of writing a poem.

The exegetical school of criticism has its limitations and can lead to a great amount of 'reading into' a poem notions which are entirely the critic's (of which error Elder Olson's astrological analysis of the "Altarwise by owl-light" sonnets is a salutary example), or to the undiscriminating presentation of meticulously worked out meanings of images and symbols with no regard to relative importance or to the final effect of the poems in which they occur (of which error, Professor Tindall's book is an unreadable example).
Yet where close examination of the fabric and structure of a poem can at once demonstrate the rhetorical emptiness of Sitwellian criticism and the misdirected emphases of Gibson's approach, the exegetical approach has much to offer. By exposing the falseness of statements about "absolute poetry," by showing how poems can be reviewed not just acclaimed, and by revealing how a poem can act through its words to construct a pattern of meanings which is certainly expressive of some experience but the reverberations of which are only limited by the sensibility of the reader, it can deflate the Sitwells and Reads and redirect the Gibsons. As a pioneer of such criticism, William Empson is well known, and his detailed undertaking to do what was then unusual, to say what Thomas means in a poem ("A Refusal to Mourn" is chosen), is a notable event in the criticism of Thomas. He begins his article with a general summary of how Thomas works:

He works by piling up so many distant suggestions at once, and half the time is not "saying anything" in the ordinary meaning of the term. You are not expected to take in the whole of this poem on a first reading as the eye goes down the page, which is what good prose should allow you to do; the thing is meant to grow in the mind, or at least echo around there. On the other hand, I think there is no reason to feel that 'modern' poetry is some obscure new trick. Poets have always worked by piling up suggestions. Dylan Thomas does it more than most; you may say too much, but there is no fundamental difference in technique from older poets, certainly not from Shakespeare.135

As well as the analysis of the poem, which need not be reproduced here, there are a few useful points in Empson's essay. His main contention is that there are too many possible meanings to allow one to give a prose account of such poetry, although Thomas did

specify the importance of a narrative element. It is a poetry of limited and repeated ideas, so that the same explanations will "do again and again" and a poem can be enjoyed without worrying over much about specific meanings. Because poems do not develop, one remembers "single rich phrases rather than a connected argument," and they form a composite group although more memorable as 'units' in Deaths and Entrances. Apart from these remarks the importance of the article is in its method: the application of modern ideas of linguistic analysis cleared away much of the confusion created by the imposition of critical theories on the poetry and forced the poems to establish their own value.

By ignoring strict chronology, we can follow further development of the close textual analysis during this period. Professor Tindall approaches the poems in the belief that Thomas is "the best and most magical English-speaking poet to have appeared since Yeats began to write." His "more than Elizabethan abundance" involves a separation from the reader which leads to obscurity, but Tindall is confident that his dependence on Freudian and Biblical symbolism makes him easier to understand than Eliot," Thomas's Freudian use of dreams explains the construction and "hallucinatory brilliance" of the poems:

A dream, says Freud, as if describing a poem by Thomas, is a series of images, apparently contradictory and nonsensical, but arising from hidden material that yields a clear meaning. On the manifest level of the dream occur these symbols of garden, apple or serpent, that appear so conspicuously in the myths of our ancestors. These symbols are there, says Freud (again as if describing a poem by Thomas), so that they cannot be understood. The conscious mind, beguiled by manifest

wonder, is kept by them from awareness of the latent meaning, which is generally sexual. Accepting this theory as a theory of poetic composition, Thomas makes artificial dreams. The rich, attractive confusion of his surface is the manifest level which at once conceals and reveals the latent meaning. When analysed, or rather psychoanalysed, the surface disorder yields the sense.

For Tindall there is no dichotomy between style and content, surface and meaning; the sexual significance of the images reveal the sense:

Thomas combines the relations of the sexes into one figure ... Kissproof is the name of a lipstick. Therefore this word resolves itself into lip (female), stick (male), and, by its literal sense, frustration. Around these primary meanings in their context cluster imnumerable associations.

He continually separates words and phrases into male and female, as in his analysis of "I see the boys of summer," which he interprets as a poem in which the author addresses our sub-rational levels whilst preoccupying our intellects in a search for meaning. The life cycle, the success we stages of cell, embryo and adult, is equated with the seasons. Its "central obsession" is in the antithesis of opposing forces which indicate the identity of birth, love, and death.

Tindall's interpretation of images is arresting: he refers to the undoubted masculinity of "honey images," to the "dark feminine hives and voids," and to the ambiguity of "Davy's lamp" as an image of mines (the grave) and of Davy Jones's locker (which "lies under the maternal sea"). As a critical method it is impressive but requires something to be made out of the profusion of latent conscious and subconscious meanings excavated by a psychoanalytic reading; it does, however, allow him to get round the problem of grammatical and logical confusion, since the dream does not answer
to grammar and logic when it "presents visual images without their connections." The idea has been met before, and the objection remains that only some poems are dream like in substance and that the application of a dream theory to a poem like "After the Funeral" is inappropriate. The opening sequence of images present impressions of the funeral which are related to metaphysical and Elizabethan conceit rather than the hidden sexuality of the dream:

After the funeral, mule praises, brays,
Windshake of sailshaped ears, muffle-toed tap
Tap happily of one peg in the thick
Grave's foot, blinds down the lids, the teeth inblack,
The spittled eyes, the salt ponds in the sleeves,
Morning smack of the spade that wakes up sleep. (p.87)

The "salt ponds in the sleeves", for example, are reminiscent of how Olivia was accustomed to "water once a day her chamber round/ With eye-offending brime," and we can also remember Thomas's own claim that the lines,

the gushers of the sky
Spout to the rod
Divining in a smile the oil of tears,

contained a metaphysical conceit of rain and grief, not, as was thought in the BBC, a sexual image. His denial of sexual significance is ingenuous; he could hardly deny the phallic symbolism of the preceding stanza:

A candle in the thighs
Warms youth and seed and burns the seeds of age. (p.24)

Tindall is conscious of the lessening impact of Freudian terms in later poems, but still insists on psycho-analytic methods even

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137 Shakespeare, Twelfth Night, II.29-30.
with "A Refusal to Mourn":

In these magnificent lines, the particulars of burning London are made universal by myth. Freud's imagery of sex (clocks, urns, steeples and the sea) is raised to the service of eternal life. Imagery of worship (steeples, bread, wine and masses) conspires to summon glory.

Whatever emphasis on Freud one accepts as proper, there is doubtless much to be gained from Tindall's method, but it has to be supported by other approaches unless the poetry is to be left as a disparate jumble of sexual connotations. He is aware of the need, and finds an answer in the relationships amongst three symbolic levels, Freudian, religious and literary:

The value of the poem is partly a matter of surface tensions and partly the interplay of surface and interior, of fixed meaning and endless variety. Each symbol is connected with the latent meaning, yet each maintains a subtler and almost ineffable relationship with its incongruous neighbours.

He relates Freud and the Bible by syllogism: myth is a dream the Bible is a myth, thus Freud connects with the Bible so that an image such as a "tree",

which is phallic or maternal on the Freudian level, means the cross or the tree of life on the Biblical, and on still another level it means tree.

There is nothing startling in that, and Tindall has to acknowledge that later poems have little overt Freudianism (by which is meant merely that images are less susceptible to sexual interpretation), but puzzlingly remarks that it is "sublimated by reverence." It is better to say that it is not there.

Textual criticism based on a preconceived idea can too often result in the critic's supplying what he seeks to find, even if the idea is derived originally from the poetry. Because there is much
sexual imagery, Freudian critic labels the poet 'Freudian,' and thereafter sees him conforming to the set pattern. More interestingly, Tindall's method attracts a response which criticises the poetry for what Tindall claims for it, describing "I see the boys of summer" as a "bit of esoteric Freudian symbolism that the Viennese master himself might have had to puzzle over before offering an interpretation." In objecting to Thomas's sailing under false colours by exploiting Freudian ideas as poetry, Rice fails to distinguish between claims made by a critic and the poetry itself. He also provides a further instance of overlooking the point that whereas Thomas's sexual pre-occupations may be interpreted by Freudian methods, the poetry itself remains no more than expression of sexual pre-occupations. In a parody of the poem, he purports to demonstrate its unintelligibility, but only establishes that the style is open to easy parody:

These girls of darkness are girdleless in their folly,
Acid the bubbling molasses;
The jills of ice they finger in the pan:
There in the dark the melting fiber
Of faith and light they stuff their sinews:
The token sun is so-so in their voids.

We are the light affirmers, let us summon
Birth from an autumn maiden,
A gurgling death from haters in their cramp,
"From the fair dead who flush the sea"
The goggled wiggler phosphorescent,
And from the seeded uterus homunculus.

These lines do not even have the wit or the satiric accuracy of J. A. Lindon's parody of "Poem in October," which begins,

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139 L. L. Rice, American Scholar, XVIII, 254.
It was my dirtiest year to heaven
Drove me to feeling since barber and neighbourhood
Were becoming cool though a wretched
East-wind chore
The morning beckon
With water-ladle and loofah and none to look
And the knock of waiting folk on the padlock door
Myself to set foot
Bow-legged
In the deep-filling tub of wet froth.

Lindon parodies both vision and style, and contrives to repeat the sound patterns of the original quite successfully, but parody is like caricature, for it throws into relief the outstanding features of style through exaggeration. It proves nothing about the meaningfulness of the original and is properly a matter of good-humoured criticism; by attempting to impose a pattern on Thomas's poetry, Tindall encourages the sterility of criticism like Rice's which is inspired not by poems but by other criticism.

When a critic is hostile to the organic profusion of Thomas's work, he is not impressed by textual analysis, and will even argue that the need for it demonstrates the obscurity of a poet who is accustomed to "parade his 'visions' before the reader in a mass of hyphenated verbosity that makes the Hampton Court Maze look a straight line," and who regardless of a few poems of a fine quality, generally provides the "blurred portrayal of a strained mentality."

His argument is simple: because it takes a scholar of Empson's ability three pages to analyse twenty-four lines of verse, the poem must be obscure, but it is a false deduction, for all it proves is that there must either be a richness of potential meaning or that the critic is supplying meaning which was never created by the poem. It proves nothing about the accessibility or obscurity of a primary level of narrative meaning, and the truth is that the poems vary
considerably in the immediacy of subject. Where a poem is wrought with skill, there is both a compression of meaning such that a sentence is far more than a bare statement, and a suggestiveness which should stimulate the creation of a progression of ideas by its readers: it ought to be inevitable that the interpretation of a poem is many times greater in length than the poem itself, otherwise the poem lacks the vital quality of compression.

The greatest achievement of an exegetical approach is that it can illuminate the way in which the poem creates a constant interaction of images, words and phrases, out of which the understanding of the poet's experience grows; by leading the reader through the verbal processes of the poem, close linguistic analysis can provide him with help in appreciating its significance, although it is arguable whether it is a normative appreciation rather than just a descriptive one. In poetry which lacks a clear logical statement of the experience, the significance can be apprehended through the connotations and interplay of images bound together by a unity not imposed by a narrative, but evolved from the inter-relationships of images. The attention to detail in Empson's and Tindall's articles presages a fruitful method of discussion, out of which much good descriptive criticism has come. Its limitations include the constant risk of going beyond what is in the poem, the fact that it is not an adequate critical method on its own but one which requires an evaluative method to assess the merits of the poems, and the tendency to analyse individual poems without considering the poetry as a collection of experience relating to an insight into human life. The last factor often involves an exaggeration of the poet's
merit because the complexity of one poem and the amount of explanation needed to investigate its expression gives a false impression of value: the amount of critical energy needed for explication is falsely equated with the value of the poetic experience. Empson is right to warn that the same explanations of the ideas will do again and again.

While individual poems were beginning to attract close scrutiny at this time, we see well established the more traditional critical method of establishing broad principles about the nature of the poetry before seeking in detail for evidence of poems which correspond before making value-judgements on the basis of 'what the poetry is about.' The method can be seen to culminate at this time in Treece's full-length critique, and most frequently attempts to outline the poet's development. Evidently, it will not be subject to the same limitations as close explication, and will particularly offer the broad sweep of a survey in an attempt to establish the merits of the poet and his status compared with other poets; its most notable drawback is the temptation to vague generalisations which ignore the variableness of the poems, inferring a simple development of style:

In the Twenty-five Poems ... all is arranged on a stock principle of association, and tumultuous assaults are made on the imaginative experience of the reader to produce the requisite mood and suspension.

In Deaths and Entrances the same principle is employed, but the mood is one of acquiescence to the necessity of emotional and, in parallel, moral control ... The wild note of genius heard in Twenty-five Poems has bowed to the dictates of art in Deaths and Entrances. But not in sullen surrender, for Thomas has realised the necessity for control over his intense imagination, which, unregulated, would have ridden rough-shod through the venerable canons of poetry's aesthetic.

140 Apart from Empson and Tindall's articles, the first Thomas poem analysed in Explicator appeared in May 1945.

141 Kenneth Hopkins, The Isis, April 28, 1948, p. 10.
It is not that comments like these are wrong, but that they are not comprehensive nor adequately directed. When more detailed, the judgements can be more constructive, even if antagonistic, and an approach from a wide perspective can lead the critic to argue the case for detailed explication.

Aneurin Rhys is not impressed by his general view of Thomas's achievement, and argues that the need for close analysis demonstrates the poor quality of the poetry:

Though Mr. Dylan Thomas's first book of poems appeared in 1934 I still wonder whether his verse is the product of a buffoon with a flair for poetry or of a poet with a taste for buffoonery. For years I have been prying steadily deeper into the spiralling recesses of Mr. Thomas's imaginative perspective, sometimes enraptured by vistas of wonder and surprise, more often "imbrangled" in the preposterous mazes of his baroque rhetoric.142

Helped by Thomas's readings, he is no more impressed by a closer perspective which reveals the poems to be,

enigmatic variations on the libidinous obliquity of Mr. Thomas's cataclysmic vocabulary, festooned with cryptics and laminated with demi-idioms in a disgusting but irresistibly intriguing omelette of grammatical rarities, verbally exciting but syntactically obscure.

His antagonism is based on his respect for the "ordinary reader of poetry" and the difficulties he will encounter with a specialised technique which acts as a barrier to him who "likes poetry for pleasure but has been made suspicious of philological smatterings."

Such a simplistic view of 'poetry for pleasure' and of the poetic audience inevitably finds much modern poetry distastefully obscure but it also demonstrates the value of approaching poetry without

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prejudice in order to establish what its nature is, of initially accepting a poem without reference to set principles in case its nature necessitates an adjustment of critical principles or method. Modern poetry has necessitated many adjustments in critical thinking, not least of which has been the demand for uncluttered analysis of the poetic act; Rhys typifies the reaction of one whose ideas do not apply to the poetry he encounters, and if he is approaching recognition of the need for detailed textual analysis by absurdly insisting on the need of a dictionary and "unlimited research among philological curiosities, remote archives of incunabula, painstaking accumulation of personal reminiscence and biographical detail," his own gesture towards analysis is wildly inaccurate:

He even achieves the inhuman accomplishment of witty comment in a frame of solemn metaphor. To write that -

"... sunlight paints the shelling of their heads"

is to convey with delightful and dignified delicacy that certain persons were as bald as eggs.

It may be a fault of the poetry that it is often too imprecise to avoid the possibility of gross misinterpretation, but here the context sufficiently establishes that the phrase images the birth of a child in terms of hatching:

I see the summer children in their mothers
Split up the brawmed womb's weathers,
Divide the night and day with fairy thumbs;
There in the deep with quartered shades
Of sun and moon they paint their dams
As sunlight paints the shelling of their heads. (p.1)

Rhys is only significant because he represents the bewilderment of one whose sensibility is too inflexible to accommodate the complexities of a poetry of verbal intricacy and because he shows how
modern poetry had become accessible to a very restricted audience:

Struggle as we may with dictionaries and grammatical relaxations there will remain large expanses of poetic territory in which Mr. Thomas has set no landmarks for the uninitiated, no beacons for the unenlightened poetry lover.

Whoever the "poetry lover" could have been, it is easy to dismiss Hhys without recognizing that Thomas was but one poet of a number who had successfully excluded many readers who were willing enough listeners but who were suspicious of the need for intensive analysis because of their assumption that poetry was a direct statement, accessible to anyone with a modicum of wit. The popularity of his more lucid poems and especially of his public readings could partly be attributed to the reaffiliation of this previously expelled audience.

Extracting generalizations from the poetry has produced criticism which was able to assess its value. Generally, the critic describes central themes which are then amplified and substantiated by reference; Thomas's themes are almost invariably described in broad abstractions:

Dylan Thomas is predominantly a poet of childhood and the primitive. The themes to which he returns again and again are the themes of his own childhood, and the childhood of his race, his own beginnings and the beginnings of the world.143

His central thesis is the straightforwardness of Thomas's development towards increased clarity and an improved technique for dealing with the same preoccupations in later poems as in the earlier; his method is appropriately straightforward, chronological discussion of the

published volumes. From the horrifying adolescent vision of *Eighteen Poems*, he traces an increasingly biblical tone supplanting the "organic process of nature" with its looking back to the "god of the beginning" in *Twenty-five Poems*; in *The Map of Love*, he finds maturity, greater activity and an outward concern for the "world of events":

Hitherto the poet has been the passive sufferer of the fact of birth, of his own and the world's genesis, and he has been identified with the helpless manchild. In these poems he is an active participator in events and he writes no longer from the viewpoint of 'the urchin grief', but of the

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....... plagued groom and bride
Who have brought forth the urchin grief.
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He regards *Deaths and Entrances* as a further confirmation of improvements in clarity and variety of theme and concludes with a general superficiality:

Mr. Thomas has the innocent eye. He is not struggling in the meshes of life-in-death and death-in-life as though caught in the unexpected net. He is surprised. So are we. And in 'Fern Hill' this element of surprise and greenness is present in a more ambitious poem, and a poem that is in the run of his preoccupation. I think that is the best possible augury for the future.

Although the reader can make use of the concluding generalities of Moore together with the definitive analysis of Tindall, there is a need for criticism which will fuse analysis and thematic discourse into an effective evaluation of the poetry: it might be expected from an article entitled "An Approach to Dylan Thomas."¹⁴⁴ There has been little evidence so far of a satisfactory approach to the poetry, possibly because there had been insufficient work to deal

with, but in 1948, Huddlestone was able to approach from the simpler poetic experience of the later poems to the complexities of the earlier ones. It is a useful method involving the use of generalised impression to illuminate the particulars of poems and presuming that the essential themes have not changed radically. The more accessible experience of *Deaths and Entrances* can be sought in *Eighteen Poems*, thus illuminating some of the processes of expression which taken alone often form a barrier to comprehension. In a poem by poem account, she establishes the simple abstract themes of the one-ness of the elements of life, the paradoxes of the "birth-decay-death cycle," and the religious ritual of the war poems such as "Deaths and Entrances" in which "once again the prelude to death is connected with a whole series of paradoxical, mysterious and allegorical relationships." Thomas is not considered to adopt moral attitudes to war, yet not content merely to record his personal feelings; he is said to give us poetry that is religious and ritualistic rather than devotional.

After establishing a broad perspective, Huddlestone views the earlier volumes as steps in the development towards the strengths of *Deaths and Entrances*, and consequently as being indeterminate and incomplete. *Eighteen Poems* was "a long rehearsal of 'the first declension of flesh', the separate poems a series of documents for psychopathic analysis," an exploration of a universe motivated by sex and a life which is but a stage towards death. The pessimism she finds qualified by a strange positivity:

However, through such disruption and negation of life assailed by the intimidations of sexual disgrace and the diabolically active forces of sin, there are signs that something positive has been found - though positive in the sense of a double-minus. Death is change, and there is a kind of creative energy in that change itself.
The conflict within himself is not resolved in the first book, and still in *Twenty-five Poems* despite a sense of co-ordination, she notes a negative sadness in his finding the universe essentially sinful and ravaged by the destructive power of Time. In "Bars in the turrets hear," she recognizes that Thomas is confronting himself with the choice of self-imprisonment or of confrontation with the world of experience, and sees him in the sonnet sequence using religious myth and experience to come to terms with his conflict. Sin is expressed as an agent which frustrates all attempts to find permanence in life because it brings death, and Christ's resurrection "not only as a conquering of death and a redemption of sin, but also as the focal point in history ... which brings eternity to man, killing time once killer of man." Christ is sexually implicated in the universe by his conception but transcends his sexual nature in the Passion. All of this explanation is straightforward and illustrates how the application of a general premise, together with a fairly close interpretation of individual poems can result in a clear description of the experiences through which the poet is going, although it does not deal with the question why these themes and conflicts are expressed in such a dense proliferation of obscure images.

The introduction of a biographical material can sometimes clarify poetic development; Huddleston rightly states a causal relationship between the birth of his son and the development evident in the poetry:
Thomas's work after 1936 is characterized by an increase in intensity of personal experience resulting in poems which bring further to light the unusual personality of the poet; also by a new perspective, opened partly by this deeper awareness, first of human relationships, later of universal analogies.

Her main contention is that the themes become progressively more integrated with religious thought, so that childbirth in "Vision and Prayer" from Deaths and Entrances is as violent as in The Map of Love, but is embodied in a vision in which "nativity death and resurrection are seen collaterally," and in which

man and dust rise up together. The veins of the body and the veins of the rock return to their natural unity. Genesis and Apocalypse coexist in the ascension of man at his true moment of origin.

Huddlestone does not evaluate the religious thought and therefore cannot point out the restricted significance of poetry which uses the myths and transcendental beliefs of a religion in an emotive way. It has an impact which is impressive, but it must remain a record of a vision in which the issues implied demand a philosophical enquiry expressed in a less imagistic manner. Yet she does not make unsupported claims for the poetry, even when highly praising "A Winter's Tale" as one of the century's finest poems with its "expression of romantic love culminating in an ecstatic union, above and apart from, time and death," or describing "Ballad of the Long-legged Bait" as

the spontaneous welling-up of an intensely personal vision, a vision that is truly apocalyptic and which overloads the very words trying to convey it, and yet it irresistibly carries the reader on into unfamiliar regions.

The article has nothing new to say about the poetic method; it draws our attention to the frequent symbolic use of water and
of other elements:

The other elements, air earth and fire, the sun and the moon, the globe of Earth, the planets and the stars, the she-bird and the beast, the phoenix and the dove - all enlarge the emotional horizon beyond the world of man into the cosmos itself,

and Thomas is placed in a line of English poets by having returned originality and invention to the language, and by seeing "through the immediate object" to the "timeless pattern" beyond. This has to be questioned because it remains doubtful whether Thomas ever established a 'pattern', a word which denotes a fixity of design and purpose which is seldom, if ever, expressed. Huddleston's criticism, helpful as it is in directing the reader to the principal features of the poetry, also implies too much that it is a poetry of ideas, and does not sufficiently emphasise the manner of expressing experience and insight. It would be a wrong impression to take it that Thomas expresses thought out ideas which are delineated by the words of the poems, a conclusion towards which the article tends.

The practice of seeking the salient features of poetry, discussing them and supporting by individual poems is at its most limited in Treece's full-length study, the first in book form. The work is fragmented, and develops separately a number of ideas on aspects of the poetry which do not cohere into a clearly defined critique. A chapter on surrealism previously published, one on general characteristics, one on influences, and another on mediaevalism individually lead the reader into the poetry, but there is little unity. The study was not greeted enthusiastically, the most prominent objections being that it is incoherent, some parts being

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145 See above, footnote 125.
scarcely revised articles, previously published; that by not making an adequate survey of *Deaths and Entrances* he confuses the issue of Thomas's status; and that he fails to resolve the obscurity dilemma.

It would be too far removed from the poetry to survey the criticism of Treece's criticism, but exception can be made of *Scrutiny*’s review by R. G. Cox, which continues that journal’s dismissal of Thomas. Though unjustifiably categorical, Cox is right to expose the lack of convincing evaluation in the favourable criticism:

> Nothing has been more irritating about the vogue for Dylan Thomas’s poetry than the apparent inability of his admirers to explain their enthusiasm. All sorts of unlikely people were, one gathered, swept off their feet by it, but no intelligent account of the experience emerged, much less anything that could be called reasoned analysis.

He is disappointed in Treece who, being "innocent of standards and of critical method," fails to rectify an unsatisfactory situation, for he is not prepared to accept laxity in critic or poet:

> He seems to have no conception of the poem as in some sense a public fact, a resultant of different personal interpretations. Thomas’s poems, he tells us, "stand or fall by the coincidence at the time of writing with a similar mood or emotion on the part of the reader."

Most of these quotations come from the chapter on "General Characteristics", which ends with a note that Thomas is often "unrepentantly directionless" and adds the significant comment: "That is how it is; and in a cultural tradition, such as ours, of indefinite laxity, how it should be." We have moved a long way from Lawrence’s "Thank God I’m not free, any more than a rooted tree is free."

He expects an "imaginative coherence and emotional order" in poetry and expects the critic to have more than the naive idea that "to object to a poem on the ground of incoherence can only mean that one is asking for the simplest paraphraseable prose sense."

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Cox is aware that it is unfair to judge a poet by what a critic says of him, but maintains that only a critic with low standards can appreciate merit in Thomas:

No doubt it is hardly fair to judge a poet by the pronouncements of his advocates, but it cannot altogether be without significance that on the rare occasions when a critic with standards brings himself to consider Thomas's work carefully and closely he tends to report with very little enthusiasm.

Equally, it can later be argued that few critics who have little enthusiasm fail to qualify their comments because of several outstanding poems. Cox's objections are partly based on the poetry's lack of organized communication, in which he cannot have adequately considered the few lucid but impelling poems, but his adverse criticism requires to be answered. It is not answered coherently by Treece because of his acceptance of an imprecise manner of communication:

Let me say then that after tackling Thomas's poetry at various phases of his development and making a special effort over 'Deaths and Entrances' I can see very little of positive achievement, though I am ready to be convinced by any critic who will point out to me what I have missed. His work shows undoubted poetic gift, but a complete lack of organisation and discipline. The much-vaunted romantic subjectivism looks for the most part like an excuse to avoid the trouble of precise communication. Of course, if Mr. Treece is right, communication doesn't matter, except to that fit audience though few with similar compulsions, and some of the poet's own comments on his work seem to tend the same way. One can only insist that the vivid symbolisation of personal conflicts does not by itself constitute art. "Stephen Spender," says Mr. Treece, "will appeal to many who like pleasant sounds and new high-lights on old pictures; but Dylan Thomas will be the meat of the man whose primitive wonder, newly awakened, demands a fresh, if unbalanced world in which he may declare his own dreams unselfconsciously." If these are really the alternatives it won't merely be the literary equivalents of the President of the Royal Academy who decide to keep their money in their pockets.
Cox is right to insist upon high standards in art, and right to demand that the poet communicate his experience without being naive enough to imply that communication is simply a matter of making direct verbal statements to be instantly translated into a prose paraphrase. If he sounds implacably opposed to romantic subjectivism and the "vivid symbolisation of personal conflicts," he is really attacking a method on the basis of its disorganization and leaves himself the option of accepting the content in all its subjectivism provided it is adequately communicated. His opposition to the undiscerning praise of poetry he believes to be ill-organized, loosely conceived and self-indulgent is well-founded, because when stricter critical standards are applied, only a few poems survive as meritorious.

Since it was Cox's aim to criticize Treece's book, it is wrong to suggest that he could be more flexible and more prepared to see the few poems which stand up to rigorous criticism. He ably points to the dangers of critical laxity and we can look to other critics to isolate those poems in which experience and expression are unified. Gwyn Jones, writing at this time, is prepared to be selective, to ignore poems displaying a "wantonness of imagery which disguises a triteness of thought," or a "deliberate laying of trip-wires for the over-devout."147 Although struck by the early poems in which Thomas was a "terrifying adolescent in a terrifying world, juiced out like a ripe plum with Freudian concepts, the unashamed explorer of the hero, saint, scoundrel and fool every man carries under his skin," Jones is properly impressed only by some later poems from

Deaths and Entrances:

This astonishing book is one of the treasures of our generation and it is difficult to speak of it without emotion. The known qualities are amply displayed: the art and craft of verse, the beauty and fire of words, the interwoven subtlety and strength; but there are two things added. The less important is a mastery of intricate and patterned metre; the more important is the maturity and majesty of six or seven poems.

The vision of life is a man's, and it is religious. Not often devotional, and most happily never denominational, but deeply and consciously religious. "Vision and Prayer" is the apogee.

It is no more tenable a position to justify all of the poems without abandoning any pretence at maintaining a critical standard than it is to reject all of them because of the worst faults of some, and yet there is much criticism which attempts to hold one or other position. Jones reached an obvious compromise, which can eventually lead to an acceptable evaluation, by isolating a few poems which reach "new levels of perception and feeling"; "Poem in October," "Fern Hill," "This side of the truth," "In my craft or sullen art," and "A Refusal to Mourn". Modern methods of linguistic analysis make it easier to select the best poems by showing how the intricacies of its structure and imagery create a core of interesting experience.

Criticism between 1946 and 1949 has raised important issues in a way made possible by the general attitude that Deaths and Entrances marked a poetic 'coming of age'; the critics write less of a developing and more of a developed poet, seeking to ascertain what he has developed into and, particularly in Linden Huddleston's essay, what the processes of development have been. The central issue is clear from both the discussion of Thomas's romanticism and in the beginnings of the application of the methods of the 'New
Criticism'. It is concerned with the poet's relationship to the experience he has recorded in his poem and the effect this has on the relationship of the experience to the reader. The situation can be discussed in terms of romanticism, and is also a matter of 'meaning' to be dealt with as an analytic problem. Thomas records intensely personal experiences by creating an activity that is an image of his emotional and intellectual involvement in the experience (usually there is much emotion and little intellect, if the terms are separable). As a result the reader has to share in or at least be a knowledgeable spectator of the activity and finds himself trying to cope with attitudes, responses, reactions, creations and destructions and not with ideas. Ideas do develop from the poems and it is possible to discuss themes and subjects, but presentation of ideas alone makes for thin criticism, because the critic has not engaged in exploring the verbal activity of the poems. Close textual analysis is the only method by which this activity can be explored (even if it takes three pages for twenty four lines), but the danger remains that the effort of making the analysis is falsely equated with merit in the poem. An alternative approach has also been noted: broad notions of theme and form lead to a closer assessment of individual poems. A helpful survey of development and poetic contribution is made, but the method often lacks the analytic discrimination needed to weed out the many poems of poor quality and to show awareness of why they are poor and others are good.

A period in which the first full-length critical work was published, might be expected to have made significant progress towards better assessment of the poetry, but although the periodical
articles suggest that constructive use will be made of their methods, Treece's book was a disappointment. Where one would expect to benefit from the sustained criticism of a book, the meticulous following through of ideas to their conclusion, there is only a series of articles, some of which had previously been published separately. The criticism is correspondingly disjointed and when one considers the inexcusable failure to direct the book according to the considerable achievement of *Deaths and Entrances*, Treece's reliability as a critic is greatly undermined. Linden Huddleston's brief survey of the poet's development is in many ways more considered, and is descriptively a better guide for the reader.
CHAPTER SIX

COLLECTED POEMS

Between the comments of Treece's book and the wide acclaim of Collected Poems, the benefit of careful explication are more clearly seen, and even in an article which aims at a wide perspective on the poetry, there is a significant amount of textual scrutiny.148

David Aivaz and Stephen Spender appear to be in conflict over the 'ideas' in the poetry, but this is more a terminological confusion: both are in contention with Symons's idea that the poems have nothing to say, answering the criticism by explaining what they believe the poems convey. The expression of the poet's active contemplation of or subjection to the processes of life requires a verbal activity that gives rise to a rush of associations, suggestions, paradoxes and implied power, all of which, and more, can be analysed to demonstrate the poet's response to the situation or process. It is a poetic method which often excludes the reader because the poet's response is too strange and his vision strained and foreign to the reader's own experience, but if it is to be understood and given a fair chance, it must be met on its own methodological ground by analysing the connotations of the words and the relationships amongst them to appreciate the active responses of poet to vision.

Aivaz mentions Thomas's influence on Neo-Romantic writers like Treece and J. F. Hendry, considers what various critics have said about him. He expresses caution over using Thomas's letter to

148 Babette Deutsch, see below, footnote 149.
Treece to substantiate "generalisations about the degree of reasonableness in his poetry;" he rightly wants evidence to come from the poetry. Because it was obscure poetry in its early days, its difficulties can only be challenged by method; analysis is his method for coping with "the weighting of one symbol with more than one idea or quality, "and the dialectical method which is inevitable because of the "contradictory nature of the motivating centre." He analyses stanzas of "When, like a running grave," and argues that the diffuse-ness of the prose explanation "only commends the tautness of these stanzas." If an image is no more difficult or diffuse than the idea it suggests, Aivaz accepts its difficulty, and in noting the complexity and exactness of supposedly 'warring' images, lists the many techniques which provoked accusations of automatic writing:

In the early poems especially, it is not only the weight of each image, but also the way in which the images are brought together that gives an appearance of automatism. The generative principle of the image, breeding the next, is always an extension of descriptive or symbolic content; the generative method, however, is very often an unashamed and inexhaustible word-play. The transition from image to image is by means of the pun, the double meaning, the coined word, the composite word, the noun-verb, the pronoun with a double antecedent. And there is a larger machinery, verbal and syntactical: clauses that read both forward and backward; uneven images that are smoothed by incantatory rhythms, rhymes, word patterns, verse forms, by the use of commas in place of full-stop punctuation; wrenched platitudes and cliches, the shifted word or words suggesting the image to follow; cant, slang terms, and formal general, abstract wording juxtaposed in image after image, so that the agitation of each becomes the repose of the group.

Despite the appearance of a surface that is confusedly on the move, Aivaz is convinced that the movement is controlled, and with regard

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to accusations of unconscious writing, he is right, but many poems are so confusing that the "repose of the group" is hard to find, or, when arrived at, scarcely worth the effort of achieving it.

Aivaz does not dispute the simplicity of the themes: in explaining how natural images are symbolically identified with the poet through the "process that moves them both," he is not trying to exaggerate the thematic importance:

The "meaning" of process, abstracted from the poems is as simple as is, for Symons, the "meaning" of the poems. Process is unity in nature; its direction is the cyclical return; the force that drives it is the generative energy in natural things. Like the "motivating centre" of a Thomas poem, it is "destructive and constructive at the same time"; so that not only do life and death imply each other . . . but they are in fact indistinguishable.

Exploring the process involves subjection to forces and influences - hence the paradoxical activity of the poet's experience and hence Aivaz' view that the religious element is that of the 'quest':

Thomas pays process the respect that is an absolute's due by expressing it often in the traditional images of devotion and quest. The sacrament is almost a worldly partaking. In four images from three poems, time is a grail, gospel, saint, and priest; other images bring together the heavens and heaven, tear and church, snow and parish, grave and font, dust and saviour. In the Biblical imagery itself, Christ is "Jack Christ," "Jack of Christ": his passion is Everyman's. There is frequent identification of Christ with Adam, and, generally, of Christian imagery with the imagery of process.

It is essential to make use of closely textured criticism like this to form ideas about the wider implications of the poems. When he speaks of devotion, quest and the religiousness of the verse, Aivaz also notes that Thomas does not involve morality, the wider significance of which is that the religious elements are made use of as a means of expression and of creating atmosphere and tone, but that the poems are
not religious in essence. A truly religious poem is a moral poem: Aivaz is right that these process-poems are descriptive and exploratory, but non-moral, therefore we must deduce that they are not essentially religious. The religiousness is a primitive awareness of an ineffable supernatural power, and is expressed in Biblical terms as a revelatory vision:

The function of vision is to point out the Way:

Seasons must be challenged or they totter
Into a chiming quarter
Where, punctual as death, we ring the stars . . .

Birth, copulation or death as the season demands it; but the theme is not one for Symon's catalogue. A revelation, it is expressed in images of revelation. The coming of vision is likened to the breaking of day. Hymen and caul, shell and chrysalis (and once removed the "film of the eye", the "cataract ed eye") are also broken in images of consummation and conception, or of birth. In more recent poems, the daybreak images remain, but the related sexual cluster has been replaced by images involving "locks" . . . The locks are of an illusory art or faith.

The value of what is revealed ought to be questioned here, for the remoteness of the vision from the experience of the reader often makes Thomas's world of process fascinating to observe but difficult to share; too seldom does his vision convince the reader that it is a significant perspective on a shared reality. Too often the reader revolts against the obsessions and the horrors, not as from an unpalatable but inescapable truth, but from a distortion and disfiguration. It is thus the poems in which Thomas retracts from the nightmarish attempts to reconcile himself with a world of constant polarized conflict, that are most widely appreciated. It is probable that where Aivaz discusses Thomas's attempts to reconcile himself with 'process', he is indirectly showing that the poet as a man was
frequently at odds with his early vision:

But to celebrate in vision is not to reconcile in fact. The problem of reconciliation - of the individual with the general process - is a major theme in Thomas. More than any other, the theme sets his poetry apart from the poetry of the Neo-Romantics, whose Gothic landscape cannot sustain an imagery of paradox.

Thomas's "mystic plight" is his inability to make meaningful "an individual history by a vision of continuity"; the artist is alone, a non-participant in the celebration. It is true that efforts to impose continuity by identification with major events of religious history, the Creation, the Fall, the Resurrection, each event being re-experienced in the individual, are inconclusive, but he is wrong to suggest the poet is a non-participant in the celebration. Celebration is the activity of a person or group engaged in responding to a given situation; unless the poet is an observer of another person's celebration, he must himself be the sole participant and it is obvious that Thomas has no one else in his poems whose celebratory activity is to be observed.

In discussing the way man "informs" and affects his environment, Aivaz has to recognize the active participation of the poet:

There is some evidence in the imagery of the later poems that vision not only celebrates process, but informs it. Thomas writes: "Man be my metaphor." Man, as part of the natural works, is subject to process too, and their resemblance in this allows the poet to speak of external nature in terms of man. But man is Thomas's metaphor in another sense. The consciousness of man shapes the natural world by its awareness of it; man is the metaphor through which the qualities of things find expression.

Thomas is said to see the world existing because it is given life by man's active interference, the "directed sea," the "watched dark" and the "conjured soil" showing how its features are made significant by the poet, but Aivaz cannot be allowed to direct our attention away
from the obviousness of the way Thomas is subjected to a bewildering set of forces, impulses and powerful influences which he tries to resolve into an acceptable pattern. He is no mere observer, or recorder, yet his participation is largely a helpless subjection to a nature whose power is beyond his control. It is not that he imposes order upon the cosmos, but that he seeks an order of which he is a relevant and important part.

The hideousness of his perception of his environment eventually defeated him, for he never satisfactorily ordered his life by recording the "individual struggle from darkness towards some measure of light." Instead, he escaped from the confusions of most of the poems of the first three volumes, and sought more often the significance of the particular event — hence the growing dependence on the situational experience that stimulates many later poems. The innocent grace of his childhood vision transforms adult perception, but by evading not reconciling the tensions and contradictions of the early work. He is left with an acute awareness of the process of time holding him "green and dying," a pervasive power to which all things belong and which is the "sundering ultimate kingdom" of "Ceremony after a Fire Raid," or the "blinding One" of "Vision and Prayer," and the transformation of sex into mythical or legendary glory in "Ballad of the Long-legged Bait" and "A Winter's Tale". The glory has a radiance which utterly transforms the glandular secretions of Eighteen Poems. Whatever remains, it is transmuted by a distancing perception which generally hides the particular confusions and irreconcilable elements of the original vision. Aivaz does not distinguish carefully enough the shift in perspective although he is
aware of it in his comments on the statement about the recording of
the individual struggle towards light:

The phrasing recalls that of the idealist: the identification of the "individual" with the general movement, the "necessity" of the movement (implicitly contrasted with the "freedom" which is its end); and the coupling of words for passion and action, for the self and the external... Considering in the light of Thomas's statement, the various redemption themes in the later poems, and the gradual shift in imagery discussed above — from the dark, dense and Freudian images to the clearer, sparser Christian and mythic images — one may enquire whether his dialectical method of composition does not in fact correspond to a dialectic of real movement in his world.

Aivaz is finally confusing, for although his method of detailed analysis is sound he is uncertain of what to do with the ideas he has found; he expects us to attend to the 'thought' of the poems, yet allows the thought no relevance beyond their own nature:

Abstracted from the world of the poems, the ideas I have considered are meaningless. Criteria that are applicable to them as ideas are inapplicable to them as ideas embodied in images.

This confusion shows that it is essential for criticism to come to terms with the nature of the ideas in the poems and with way in which they should be taken by the reader. The need for definition of the terms employed, such as 'thought', 'idea', 'emotional state', and so on is frequently found in the criticism, and many disputes could be resolved given a shared terminology. Stephen Spender sees the problem in terms of misunderstanding the nature of the poetry:

A good many critics have tried to analyse Dylan Thomas into "origins", "influences", ideas and so on. He defies such analysis because his poetry springs out of powerful personal emotions which have a strength and simplicity at times embracing universal human experience.
Dylan Thomas's poems do not move towards a philosophy and they can hardly be explained in terms of ideas. They exist on the level of something more primitive than thinking poetry - on that of the lament, the dirge, the cry, the abjuration, the announcement.\textsuperscript{150} Spender describes it as a poetry of sensations which "ceases to be intellectual and returns to its bardic roots of keening or acclaiming", in contrast to poets of the intellectual range of Auden and Eliot and their third rate imitators. There is "sheer ranting, and uncontrolled outpouring with dark emotions" (which was approximately Spender's own first reaction). Whereas Eliot has to "reconcile his aesthetic and his philosophic aims in a poetic logic which is as strict to him as formal logic to a philosopher," Thomas, it is inferred, is engaged in an active performance, a demonstration of a range of feeling. Although Spender does not pursue the point in the article, the view of Thomas as a public performer can again be seen to offer perspective to his poems.

The critic who tried to make Thomas's poems fit a neat philosophical pattern would soon fail, but in a less extreme way, some critics try to make too much out of his ideas because in their solemn explanation of the meanings of images they do not distinguish the importance of the active creation of emotion, mood and atmosphere - not the recollection of emotion in tranquillity, but the present creation of it. He creates by announcement, by images which declaim his perception of and response to the experience that is central to the poem; he is possessed, as was Hart Crane, of the revivalist's fervour, and so an exuberant poet, who heaps image on image as prodigally as he chimes rhyme with rhyme. Thomas's work presents even more difficulties than does Crane's because

\textsuperscript{150} Stephen Spender, "In the 1930s," \textit{Britain Today}, No. 173 (September 1950), p. 20.
it combines with equally private references both Freudian and Christian symbols and allusions to Welsh mythology with which few outside of Wales are familiar. Further, he is more alive to the music of his meaning than to the meaning of his music.  

He is a poet who declaims his involvement in a situation or who sings in the mode of legend and myth and whose poems are particularly susceptible to sound analysis.

Babette Deutsch was greatly concerned with the musicality of the verse, and her approach is in keeping with Spender's, resulting in a close commentary on details, as in this comment on "Poem in October":

The echo in "harbour" and "neighbour" is one of many in the first stanza alone. "Heaven," "heron," "beckon," "second," are woven on one warp of vowels, and "wood," "rook," "foot" are woven on another. But the warp is twist of several threads, or ... there are other repetitive sounds, "woke" alone having five alliterations, and echoing again in the vowels of "shore" and "forth," the consonants of "rook" and "knock."

She also writes with a wider sweep:

'When all my five and country senses' ... tells us once more, but with what packed urgency, that as the youth becomes more self-conscious, his sensuous delight in the world about him decays or is blurred or grows callous, but that the poet's emotional energy will restore and vivify his responsiveness and make him as a little child who needs no pass to paradise.

Her view of the poetry is derived mostly from the later poems, and involves an appreciation of the way Thomas can capture the radiance of childhood and create a sense of wonder and beauty in musical cadences and images comparable only to Traherne's:

Repeatedly Thomas's poems quicken the sense of wonder nowhere caught in prose, save in one of Traherne’s Meditations:

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151 Babette Deutsch, "The Orient Wheat," The Virginia Quarterly Review, XXVII (April 1951), 221.
Certainly Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and curious apprehensions of the world, that I when I was a child... I knew nothing of sickness or death or rents or exaction, either for tribute or bread... The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting.

It is poetry which sings of "that first intensity of being" which she believes Thomas regretted losing more than he feared death. In the earlier poems she meets a "beclouded pantheism" which gradually gives away to a more orthodox religiosity, but in all she sees the violence of contradiction as the central method:

The Freudian recognizes the generous beauty of sexuality. The Christian, shadowed by the sense of sin of his chapel-going forebears, would destroy the body to liberate the spirit. Nearly every poem moves tempestuously among contradictory themes: birth is an act of violence, but the child is born into a world quick with delight; all living is involved with dying, but the death of the body means the first free breath of the spirit.

Deutsch is not specific about what the violence leads to, not because of an incapacity to interpret, but because of the difficulty of combining disparate elements of meaning into a narrative expression of theme:

One of his early lyrics speaks wryly of his sympathy with all that grows and flourishes: the blowing flower, the flowing stream, the rising wind, and with all the fades and dies: the crooked rose, the dried-up stream, the slackened wind, the man on the gallows, the lover in the grave (do these refer to Christ?).

At times the difficulty reduces criticism to a rather sterile discourse upon its esoteric significance:

Often Thomas seems to seek violence, whether of metaphor or of music, for its own sake, and to a degree that defies formal limits. Even these images that have a Dantesque clarity are dense with implications.
In the groin of the natural doorway I crouched like a tailor
Sewing a shroud for a journey
By the light of the meat-eating sun.

Only the initiated know that the manifold meanings in the
line about the "meat-eating sun" include allusion to a
Welsh fertility ritual. But the reference in the first
line to the position of the embryo is obvious, as is the
reference to the fact that we are no sooner conceived than
we begin to build a body dedicated to death. It is less
obvious that the tailor represents the world of the flesh
as against that of the spirit, the world of time as against
that of eternity. The derogatory meanings of this image
are clarified by its use elsewhere, as in the allusion to
the "clock faced tailors"...

Stephen Spender's opinion that the poems are hardly explicable in
terms of ideas does not mean that criticism which pursues their im-
port is pointless. If 'ideas' are taken broadly to mean symbolic
references to situations, activities, events, conflicts and so on
which can be explained by a critic as 'meanings' of an image, the
poetry offers many ideas. But these are better called the 'signifi-
cances' or 'references' of images, while 'idea' is kept for the product
of philosophical reasoning and thought which attempts to order what is
observed in the human situation. Spender certainly seems to use
idea in this sense, and makes it possible to draw a useful distinction
between Thomas and others such as Auden and Eliot, in that Thomas
only subjects himself to these processes and records his observation
and response without much evidence of applying himself philosophically
to imposing order on them. The critic who seeks a rationalisation of
Thomas's perception in the poems has to read too much into them and may
miss what they truly offer; the critic who, like Deutsch, realises
that Thomas stops short of rationalisation, appreciates that criticism
has to be vague about the 'thought' of the poetry:
At its rare best it offers the most direct kind of apprehension with an immediacy and intimacy foreign to the adult mind. Certain of his lyrics might be called musical epiphanies. Joyce's word for the illuminated moment seized upon by the artist comes to mind in connection with Thomas because of the way in which he manipulates his vocabulary.

The premise basic to Spender's criticism and to the insistence observed in several critics on the importance of sound is that verse in which the poet seeks to impress the reader with the total impact of the experience is greatly dependent upon sound. In reviewing In Country Sleep, J. L. Sweeney comments upon the importance of sound and upon the way Thomas's readings assist in clarifying the substance of poems:

The confidence that sound is one of the sources of meaning is a precious primitive part of the poetic gift and a conspicuous part if the beneficiary is a Celt. Dylan Thomas is exactly that and most readers of his poetry know that when his poems are voiced and sounded aloud they move into a clarity and definition which does not appear on the printed page - and those who have heard him read his poetry realize that he writes from as well as for the voice and eye. His poetry is shaped for the listening reader. Thomas is a Welshman and Wales is a voice.\footnote{J. L. Sweeney, New Republic, CXXVI (March 1952), 18. Review of Dylan Thomas, In Country Sleep, New York, 1952.}

Sound, other than in the sense that words are no more than sound patterns, is not strictly a 'source of meaning.' The sounds of a poem can contribute to the atmosphere and tone but can only be meaningful in terms of supporting the meaning conveyed by words in context. In poetry like Thomas's the proportional importance of sound is greater than in discursive 'thoughtful' poetry, because the living situation is more important in his verse than the possibility
of reasoned discussion; sound is vital to making a memorable impact. Thomas's poetry cannot be memorable in the way of, say *Four Quartets*, because of the intellectual issues involved, nor in the way of the *Canterbury Tales*, because of a width of social observation, human drama and sympathy. If Thomas wrote memorable poetry, it is memorable because the impact of its substance and form rather than the importance of what is said is most noticeable:

Thomas still stands alone among the poets near him in age. He started "bang off", as Empson has said, "with a highly original and within its limits, perfect technique." He had the power to turn this technique back onto tradition and evolve fresh methods of expression to accommodate the fresh experience and realisation of maturity. More than any other poet of his generation he has the power to think poetically, "to resolve speech," as Robert Graves puts it, "into its original images and rhythms and recombine these several simultaneous levels of thought into a multiple sense." Thomas is no philosophical poet - he is not Wordsworth nor was he meant to be - but there is a deep and rich vein of poetic thought in his reverberating affirmations of life and intimations of mortality.

From the beginning, some critics have recognized that one cannot approach Thomas's poetry expecting a rational, paraphraseable statement of ideas but that one must attend to the multiple significances of images and to their interaction in order to appreciate poetry which does not seek to define or explain, but to explore the activity of the cosmos and the parallel activity of man in fundamental processes of life. At this time, immediately before the publication of *Collected Poems*, there is a wider recognition of the way the critic has to approach Thomas both explicitly, as in Spender and Sweeney, or tacitly in the beginnings of close textual analysis. The appearance of *Collected Poems* was, regrettably, an opportunity for a resurgence of the adulation and denigration that have been of such
disservice to Thomas. It is too easy to be misled by the volume of praise accorded to the publication; if many shout loudly enough, people will be convinced:

It was received by the critics with fanfares. With scarce a dissenting voice, he was acclaimed a great poet. When the book appeared in America four months later, its reception was equally rapturous. And the public went to the bookshops and bought it. In the last year of Dylan's life it sold 10,000 copies in the English edition alone, and in the year after his death a further 20,000.153

If Fitzgibbon was misled, there was adequate shouting to explain it:

It would not be extravagant to claim that he has the promise of becoming the greatest poet of our time. Certainly he is the poet we need. Instead of the thin-lipped intellectualism that drips arid words, one at a time, into its meanly measured verses, here is a romantic, full of the fundamental things of life and birth and death.154

Evans may only speak of promise, but others were less reserved:

Seeing the scope and intensity of the total work it need no longer be eccentric to claim that Thomas is the greatest living poet in the English language.155

And again,

And it is clear that he is a major poet. He stands firmly on his own feet. His laurels are his own, and not to be shared with the other major poets of his immediate generation.156

Unquestionable as the general approval of Thomas is, it is quite wrong to give the impression that there was scarce a dissenting

153 Life, p.382.
154 B. Ifor Evans, "Great Poet of our Time?" The Birmingham Post, December 23, 1952.
156 Leonard Clark, Yorkshire Post, December 5, 1952, p.4.
voice. Most of the praise is qualified by recognition of the difficulties and limitations of such a personal style, and it is easy to find the reviewers criticising the familiar problems of obscurity:

But for all his naked freshness he remains an enigma for many — a kind of mutilated torso carved in the grand manner. He is violent, tender and challenging at will, so that the effect of these strange and beautiful poems, both on the ear and on the mind, is of being spattered with a rain of diamonds. Before one has recovered from their brilliant cuts, one is assailed by a further rain.\(^{157}\)

Although more favourably disposed than previously, Cyril Connolly summarises the widespread repetition of wariness in the face of obscurity:

Here arise questions of meaning and syntax. Now even allowing for the possibility that Mr. Thomas thinks in Welsh, it is patent that he is often deliberately obscure and sometimes himself unaware what his words mean, like a medium possessed by image and anthology.\(^{158}\)

His idea that Thomas thought in Welsh missed the mark, but his reserve is typical of many reviews, just as is his controlled praise for a poet who "distills an exquisite mysterious moving quality which defies analysis as supreme lyrical poetry has and — let us hope — always will." It is a reserve based on recognition of Thomas's capacity to obscure the experience in a poem, and a reserve which can provoke inconsidered abuse, as if he were guilty of a form of sacrilege:

It is the peculiar gift of Dylan Thomas . . . that he sees and writes of the world and of Man as if they had just happened. He is amazed at the wonder of the world and sometimes perplexed at man's incapacity in it. In both he witnesses grandeur and grace, evil and horror; in both he divines complexities that are too great to be simplified for the benefit of a number of one-eyed, half-eyed critics.\(^{159}\)

\(^{157}\) Leonard Clark.


There are too many critics voicing too accurate criticisms to be silenced by such arrogant journalism. From the inoffensive manner of Cyril Connolly to the incisiveness of a review in Time and Tide, there is no lack of evidence of a critical situation far removed from that described by Fitzgibbon.

Alan Ross in Time and Tide, is patently not "one-eyed," and despite his awareness of a change in the poetry, does not believe any development has taken place:

When he jumped out of the pond at the age of twenty he was already a big fish; there was never any doubt of that, and now, eighteen years later, there is still no doubt. But while the circles of that first silvery ascent have grown larger, the position of Mr. Thomas has not changed. Sometimes now he seems in danger of bobbing out of sight in the waves and thunder of his own daring; sometimes too, his feats of verbal acrobatics bring him, wet and slithery, back to the same point with tedious frequency. The reader... may regret that the view from the centre has altered so little in twenty years, and that Mr. Thomas' eyes are still fixed, a shade more sentimentally, on the same objects which, drift though he might, have sustained his vision from first to last. 160

Ross exemplifies the belief that a failure to mature is the major limitation of the poetry's substance (later developed substantially by David Holbrook161), and warns that "those who expect any grown-up, wiser postscript, any ideological development, will be disappointed". He also expresses a view, which becomes increasingly widespread, that the poetry can only be criticised selectively and that the selection is small:


Mr. Thomas's poems are basically private monologues, the precise meaning obscured or forgotten as the voice takes control, rising and falling in the rough seas of its own pleasure. It is a pity; for the dozen or so poems that make a point, or tell a story, or consciously strive to communicate with the reader, have wonderful tension. If he can find a more conversational tone, a way of preserving the beauty of his language without blowing it up, Mr. Thomas may yet increase in stature; otherwise it seems the few firm stepping-stones of his early and wartime poems may project less and less under the drowning waterfalls of later memory.

Even where a critic is writing descriptively, the terms used of the style are frequently suggestive of weaknesses which are not the marks of the great poet:

He invents compound words, uses staggering inversions and contortions of language, confounds syntax and subverts normal communication. Yet he makes an astonishing magic of so much of it.

This volume reveals him in his protean shapes, saint and sensualist, urchin imp and soaring seer, believer and sceptic, literary showman and humble, dedicated craftsman; and in so doing, helps to mirror the legion which is also in ourselves.162

There is often, too, a sense of incompleteness implied, as if the reviewer looked upon Thomas as promising but not yet reconciled to keeping to the convincing method of the few best poems:

Such lively making, and finding, is the very opposite of the mechanical formalism which Mr. Thomas has too often displayed, notoriously in a succession of typographical wings and diamonds. The artist must of course experiment; but his real technique is the kind of workmanship which allows sensibility to grow without forcing, that particular skill which helps him to say what he has to say at the moment when he is ready to say it. This principle of growth Mr. Thomas has fitfully yet brilliantly shown signs of grasping.163


It is mostly the newspapers, in which detailed and thoughtful reviewing would not be expected, that classify Thomas as great; more serious papers and weeklies such as the Sunday Times, the Manchester Guardian, The Listener and Time and Tide, are restrained in their praise and thoughtful in their criticism. The critical situation is by no means as resolved as Fitzgibbon records, nor as free from adverse comment as is suggested in the most concentrated attack on poet and critics alike.

The methodical destruction of Thomas's claims as a poet conducted by Scrutiny is blameworthy, yet not without justification nor usefulness. Robin Mayhead's contribution follows the same pattern as its predecessors by first assaulting the 'cult' before discarding the possible merits of the technique. He fails to distinguish the variableness of critical attitudes in his effort to undermine the least discriminating:

If Dylan Thomas has for some years now been the object of a cult, he has at length, to judge from the enthusiastic reception accorded to his last published volume, 'Deaths and Entrances', graduated to the status of a major, indeed a 'great' poet. But although it is now fairly usual for critics to speak of him in the same breath as Eliot, Auden and Spender - all four being, one gathers, equally 'great' poets - the kind of distinction commonly made between him and those writers is revealing and important. They, broadly speaking, are designated Classical, while Mr. Thomas, full of divine imperfection, is the ardent 'Romantic' revel.164

The idea that Thomas's romanticism and the way he restricts his poetry to a declamation of his personal responses to experience can inspire fine lyrical poetry for all its limitations, is used

destructively:

A persistent note in the encomiums with which Mr. Thomas has been larded has been an insistence on what is generally described as his youthful 'spontaneity' and freshness of response to experience, unspoilt by too much of the 'intelligence' that has, perhaps, it is tactfully suggested, made our modern poetical Renaissance rather one-sided, all this going miraculously, it would seem, with a sophisticated mastery of involved verse forms. The resultant picture is something very like the old familiar one of the Genius, in the total complex of which, one might venture, - without any disrespectful feelings towards the country of the poet's origin - the idea of the Bard counts for not a little.

Mayhead allows criticism of critics to rub off on the poet, and goes as far as to complain of the "characteristic attitude of smouldering inspiration" in the Augustus John portrait of Thomas used as a frontispiece, all of which may be necessary, but has little to do with the poetry. The tone of these remarks pervade his criticism of the poems, which only faintly approves:

Mr. Thomas is characteristically borne on a kind of Shelleyan "aery surge" through a dazzling flood of image and sensation. To note this, of course, is not necessarily to make a serious charge; such idiosyncrasies may be canalised to serve a positive end, limited though the substance of poetic interest is likely to be. And it would, I think, be hard to deny that Mr. Thomas does in some measure possess a capacity for simple sensuous evocation which, without insistence on the evident dissimilarities, may be said faintly to resemble the lesser Hopkins of the 'nature' poetry.

Whereas the aim of Scrutiny to impose strict critical standards was admirable, it was regrettably productive of dogma and could also lead its writers into attitudes of condescending arrogance, as in these comments on "A Winter's Tale":

Such writing, though not particularly distinguished, might justify one in attributing to the poet an agreeable minor talent - observe the clever concentration of suggestion in "flocked" - capable of possible useful exploitation within narrow and frankly accepted limits.
And again, on "On a Wedding Anniversary":

It is customary for Mr. Thomas to begin a poem in full 'furor poeticus', but on the rare occasions when . . . he sounds a more steady and considered note at the outset, he soon wrecks the balance by letting his undisciplined and uncritical fancy run away with him. The first stanza of "On a Wedding Anniversary", for example, despite the histrionic gesture of the opening line, has some subtlety of phrasing and movement . . . . The concluding image of the third and final stanza, on the other hand, can only be described at the most charitable, as hastily conceived and imperfectly grasped, though 'plain silly' might strike one as the more vividly suggestive term.

It is a feature of the Scrutiny critics that they concentrate on dismissing Thomas's reputed skills as tricks, circus-shows, and arbitrary displays of verbal exuberance. Mayhead continues in the same manner:

Mr. Thomas's special mannerism, in fact, is just this habit of clutching at the apparently striking image that comes to hand, without a working-out of its appropriateness. Violence is substituted for imaginative precision, as though in the hope that the force of the explosion may stun the reader's critical intelligence.

He patronisingly sweeps aside a poem like "Poem in October" (which meets with widespread approval and which is demonstrably a fine lyric), as one "which might have been quite a pleasant minor success". He complains of the way the arbitrary disposition of words in the stanzas cuts across the pauses and stresses of the sentence, turning it into depressing 'literary' exercise." He is notably insensitive to the cadences and metrical patterns of the poem, but his entire essay is motivated by a desire to destroy, and sensitivity is incompatible with destruction.

Mayhead is not willing to accept a relationship between poet and experience or poem and audience that is essentially romantic and which narrows the width of emotional reference of a poem. He presumes that
the poet intends to involve feelings common to mankind, and therefore
condemns the obtrusive 'I', but does not suggest that within the
narrow range of personal response, the poems he decries are alive
with a personal significance which can be impressive and pleasurable
for the reader to contemplate:

The feeling informing 'Vision and Prayer', a kind of self-
indulgent religiosity as grotesque as the verse-form, is
characteristic of much of the later work in this volume.
The poet's attitude to life, supposedly, has deepened; or
in other words, a mass of religiosity may take the form of
pompousunction, as in the 'Conversation of Prayers', of
pseudo liturgical juggling as in 'Ceremony After a Fire-
raid', or at its most offensive, of a downright dis-
gusting self-righteousness:

    I shall not murder
    The mankind of her going with a grave truth
    Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath
    With any further
    Elegy of innocence and youth.

... Mr. Thomas was doubtless affected by the incident,
and intended his poem to be a fitting and dignified ex-
pression of his reactions to it. The trouble is that
the pronoun 'I' as in the body of his work, is much too
conspicuous. But whereas one can tolerate this, how-
ever irritating it may be, when the basis of the poem
is mere personal rhapsody, it becomes offensive in the
extreme when the writer starts to pontificate on
matters of common human feeling and suffering.

That he is offended is a matter of his own response, but the basis of
his reaction is questionable.

Thomas does not "pontificate on matters of common human feeling
and suffering" - there are no dogmatic pressures on the reader to
adopt the same attitudes. He displays with great rhetorical force
his sense of the magnitude and nature of suffering in the form of a
requiem that is as much a performance as any musical requiem. The
most telling criticism of poems like "A Refusal to Mourn" is that
the performance can only be entered into partially, and often
remains a matter for distant admiration. It is a kind of poetry
which avoids the common properties of human feeling and suffering in
favour of the personal dirge or anthem. At worst it has the same
artificiality as the forced 'keening' of women at a native funeral -
the grief may be genuinely and deeply felt, but the demonstration of
it is foreign to the alien listener, and possibly embarrassing.

When he considers poems of a different order, Mayhead's criticism
is no more favourable and develops from an antipathy towards a poetic
method which is interpreted as a trick:

Mr. Thomas's art has not improved with the years. The
early poems in the volume though one could hardly call
any of them successful, have not that kind of gross pre¬
teniousness. And although the imagery is no less
tangled than that of the later work, it is not quite
the same haphazard welter; Mr. Thomas is being less a
genius and more of a poet .... The earlier poems make
at least a pretence of coherence, even though the effect
is often really the result of a trick. 'A process in
the weather of the heart' and 'The force that through
the green fuse drives the flower', to take two instances,
have the kind of spurious logical structure of which
Shelley's 'Music, when soft voices die' is the classic
example.

'Spurious logicality' is a description of a method of construction
based on a series of loosely analogous images leading to, but in no
way proving, the main statement:

Music when soft voices die/Fades in the memory

In both "A process in the weather of the heart" and "The force that
through the green fuse," Thomas employs a different method; where
Shelley presents images based on differing subjects and appealing to
different senses, Thomas is concerned with one subject - the process
or the force - and where Shelley draws his analogy through an effect
that is common to images of differing elements, Thomas demonstrates
how the one process or force governs various aspects of life. In
these poems there is no progression of argument, and it is wrong to
apply a measure of logic to poetry that is entirely descriptive.
Mayhead's criticism is based partly on misinterpretation of the nature
of poems, partly on an over-stressed antagonism towards the adulation
of Thomas (in itself a partial misinterpretation of the situation),
and partly on a distaste for the forcefulness and subjectivity which
are basic to the poetry.

Mayhead's passing reference to the designation of Thomas as an
"ardent 'Romantic' rebel full of divine imperfection", is not an
accurate measure of Stephen Spender's thoughtful and measured account
of Thomas's romanticism in the Spectator. His article is a central
contribution to establishing the kind of poetry we are confronted
with, a necessary but often missing fundamental of criticism. His
initial description is in terms of classicist and romantic:

The classicist expresses thought and experience which are
"poetic" material long before he has put them into rhyme and
rhythm. When translated into prose, the intrinsically
poetic nature of the subject remains. It might also be
said to follow that the classicist translates his subject
matter into poetic forms just because poetry happens to be
the most suitable vehicle for certain ideas which "fashion
truth and further mankind."165

Thomas is a romantic in the midst of a classicist tendency:

When it is put this way, one sees that a good deal of
modern poetry has, in the past ten years, developed a
classicist tendency. Both Eliot and Auden are more and
more preoccupied with ideas and experiences which are
poetry even when they are prose . . . The tendency is for
poetry to become a kind of intensely imagined portrayal
of ideas which exist beyond or outside the poetry.
Words are used with the utmost precision, and the delight
of reading such poetry is the sensitivity with which words
and forms express ideas seen through the poetry, as
through a stained-glass window which transforms a land-
scape seen through it, but at the same time imitates its
contours.

165 Stephen Spender, "A Romantic in Revolt," Spectator, CLXXXIX
(1952), 780.
Dylan Thomas represents a romantic revolt against the classicist tendency which has crystallised around the theological views of Eliot and Auden. It is a revolt against more than this, against the Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard intellectualism of much modern poetry in the English language; against the King's English of London and the South, which has become a correct idiom capable of refinements of beauty, but incapable of harsh effects, coarse texture and violent colours.

Spender presents the romantic tendency as a regard for poetry that is "a self-sufficient kingdom of poetic ideas owing no allegiance to any other system of thought, in which words become sensations and sensations words." He consequently attributes the similar tendency in Thomas's writing to romanticism:

The romantic characteristic of Dylan Thomas is that his poems contain the minimum material which can be translated into prose. He does not use words with the precision to which Mr. Eliot has accustomed us - just as Keats did not use them with the precision of Pope - because they are not directed to any concept outside the poetry. They are related to one another within the poem, like the colours of a painting, by the exercise of that sensuous word-choosing faculty of his imagination which cares more for the feel of words than for their intellectual meanings. A powerful emotion - we may suppose - suggests to Thomas an image or a succession of images, and it is these he puts down, without bringing forward into consciousness the ideas which are associated with such images.

He presumably does not mean that the poetry fails to produce concepts that are meaningful outside the poetry, which could be a criticism of 'automatic' writing, but that a concept is created by a poem from a set of stimuli, rather than that a concept is pre-existent and poeticised. But the stimulus needed to set off the poetic activity is sometimes inadequate, as Spender rightly suggests:

The weaker poems ... show that his poetry, unless it is galvanised into unity by some dramatically powerful situation, tends to fall apart into its separate compartments. It needs to be, in a quite obvious sense, inspired by a unifying vision, moment of self-realisation, great occasion, which organises the images around this centre. When this
happens, as it does in the youthful poems inspired by a sense of adolescent wonder and the later ones which tend more and more to celebrate occasions, the writing becomes wonderfully coherent, and if there are occasional obscurities, the poem as a whole is filled with joy and light.

The idea that he is at his best when his poetry is stimulated by an occasion has been observed, and here, Spender implies that it is because the concepts created within the poem require firstly to be inspired and then unified by reference to a central feature. Poetry which is directed to pre-conceived ideas finds such reference externally but the romantic poet must find it within the creation itself:

The discipline in Thomas's best work has the quality which Goethe called "demonic". It is that of a very alive person able to relate his molten, turbulent ideas to certain primary dithyrambic occasions. In poems like "Ceremony after a fire raid", and "Vision and Prayer" Dylan Thomas has discovered not a subject-matter (that he always had) but subjects which - after the impulse of the first juvenile poems - seemed rather lacking. This poetry is concentrated on the greater sensations of living: birth and death, vision and prayer, festive celebrations, like the two poems on his birthdays. In this poetry, the reader feels very close to what Keats yearned for - a life of sensations "without opinions and thoughts".

The merits of Spender's article include its helpful clarification of the nature of Thomas's poetic method and therefore points the way to a tenable critical method, based on accurate premises. Without any explicit reference, he shows that a constructive approach must follow the process of creation without seeking to find a formalised statement of external orders of thought; the critic must follow from the situation of the poem through the generation of images which form the sensations, significances and impact of the situation on the poet. Organic poetry requires a 'biological' approach: a poem which grows from a situational impulse and owes its existence to nothing other
than the impulse must be understood in terms of what makes it grow, the manner of its growth and finally what it grows into. Where there is a situation adequate to stimulate a poem that declares the poet's responses, there is usually a powerfully directed expression. Where the situation or context is made clear enough, there is the possibility for the reader to follow the direction of that expression. But where the context is not powerful enough, or not communicated clearly enough, the impulse is too weak to create a unified expression or there is an artificial injection of images which do not develop from the centre but which are added to give a superficial impression of energetic significance.

Poetry which creates concepts within itself can also be said to avoid the restrictions imposed by expressing a series of ideas:

The idea, the not altogether clear and distinct idea, that poetry should be "organic", seeks to emphasise the distinction between writing in poetry and writing in prose, that poetry wants an order other than the narrative order in which argument and reasoned discourse commonly proceed, that the poem must make this order by radical rather than linear progressions, seeking so far as it may to be somehow simultaneously present in all its parts, overcoming as far as it may the disability which language shares with all else produced in time, of one thing's happening after another. It is a very appealing and beautiful idea, for even if in poetry one thing must happen after another, nevertheless if the poem is brief enough and the relation of its parts made clear enough we may presently come to hold it, tenuously, in its entirety as a system not bound to the temporal order; only through time is conquered.166

Nemerov gives some details of the way in which poetry can work within itself, and his description leads to the point of asserting a quality that is almost beyond comprehension, beyond criticism:

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166 Howard Nemerov, Kenyon Review, XV, 477.
Poetry, it can be argued is the best means in language to this end because of its brevity and compactness, because of its metrical nature which imposes a unity of suggestion on the most diverse materials, because of the patterning and echoing of like sounds whereby the poet's art furthers the cause of this unity, and at last by images and figures, which set up cross-relations and resonances and tensions between parts of the poem too distant from one another for grammatical relation and so make a new syntax of the elements of the poem, an order other and more immediate than the narrative.

One danger is that the poet may not achieve unity in this way, in which situation there is no thought sequence to sustain the verse structure and the poem collapses or operates meaninglessly in disparate parts:

When the characteristic violence, become rather mechanical than muscular, does not cast its fine cadence over the whole, and allows the disparate objects of which it is composed to become clearly visible, the result is sometimes very funny.

Another danger is that the reader, given inadequate guidance through the creative processes of the poem either misses or misunderstands the concepts, attitudes and responses which have been made. It is therefore possible for a critic to thrust greatness upon Thomas because he imagines the poetry has greater and more universal import than it has, even if wiser people prefer to acknowledge making nothing of it:

His early poems give the impression of being written within his head, without reference to actual things. They consist mainly of images, or rather images of images, which proliferate freely in some strange region of their own, and by some irrational law, if there can be such a thing. They have a frame of music, but not of meaning, and are not in the intelligible world.167

Most reviewers and critics are concerned with what one 'makes'.

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of Thomas's poems, and so critical discussion is mostly on meaning and technique. But precisely because it is the kind of poetry described by Spender, criticism descriptive of what the poems 'say' necessarily employs imprecise terminology. Therefore we find Edwin Muir either unable to make anything of poems, or referring imprecisely to what is evident from them:

He is a poet of faith, though what his faith is his poetry does not divulge: it seems to be a natural faith, with supernatural colours... Yet it is strongly of the earth and of everything in the earth that breathes and shines. But all is irradiated with a light which comes either from heaven or from childhood.

Despite the difficulties, much of the criticism of Collected Poems successfully describes what can be derived from poems not only in terms of concepts but also of atmosphere, tone, emotional response and so on, and though there is nothing startlingly new to be discovered, even in the few new poems, there is a cumulative body of explanation which is descriptively helpful to the reader and which is indirectly indicative of the rich potential of the poetry. Since the potential is realised entirely in what is created by the organic structure, features of composition, structure and conceptualisation of impulses become important critical topics. Ultimately, most critics are aware of their evaluative responsibility, and select a number of fine poems in which the elements of imagery, metre and form combine to develop an expressive creation of an active experience. What is most frequently complained of is the exaggeration of technique often to the point of lines and phrases making noble sounds but signifying in all their sound and fury, the nothingness of an idiot's tale. Where the experience expressed is understood, its value as
a matter of common human concern, a statement of attitudes and beliefs, an indication of underlying morality and philosophy, or as a pleasurable experience for the reader, is brought into question.

Careful tracing of his method and assessment of the experiences expressed can bring about an awareness of Thomas's limitations:

His poetry is overtly prelogical: in Thomas's process, logical opposites like Being and Not-Being fold naturally into one another; death and life are directly inter-changeable terms by virtue of the process which throws them up as merely different specifications of itself.

To insist that Thomas "thinks" as, say MacNeice thinks, is to ignore the fact that the language in which Thomas's "thought" is carried out belongs to those fine days before Plato's 'Parmenides' when Not-Being still was. I am not saying that Thomas "babbles"; he doesn't. But he has anachronised the world back into his process with little concern for the cost. Christ, for instance, is in Thomas no Christian Christ, but amoral and pre-Christian; all Adonis. Moreover, his process is not only pre-logical (which doesn't matter in a poet of Thomas's skills) but also premoral (which I think does matter).168

Arrowsmith contends that by dealing too much in abstractions, a poet either truncates his human emotions or falsifies his world. This accurately explains the impression gained that Thomas's world is somehow uniquely his own, occupied by creatures uniquely transformed by him:

It is, for obvious reasons, not altogether easy to come to terms with this Hesuvian apocalypse and its passionate prophet. It has, after all, generated poetry of extraordinary vitality in the hands of a poet who lives it as a matter of faith. And for all its rigorous pre-logicality, it is not therefore philosophically invalid. But there are, I think, two major objections; one concerned with the method of its carrying out, and the other concerned with its human cost. To celebrate life means to celebrate its particularities as much as the universal behind them; and given the apparent strength-in-particularity of Thomas's poetry, it is perhaps imprudent to suggest that Thomas is

more in love with Process than the small creatures who have to live by it. But for all the flurry of creatures . . . who clamber on to Dylan's ark, it seems clear to me that if Thomas is a Franciscan, he is the Francis of symbols, without tenderness. These animals are heraldic; they are not foxes qua foxes, but Process-foxes, and what Thomas loves in them is not their individual lives but the smell of the processed fox.

There is a precision in this criticism which is not always found, since by nature the poetry leads to similar expansive gesturing by critics:

Drawing on Biblical story, Welsh folklore, and some rough Freudian notions of the relation of the sexual urge to other aspects of human activity, he constructs a pulsing passionate picture of man in time, with his desires ebbing and flowing, moving from the womb through maturity to decay, growing towards death . . . yet since death is reunification with primeval nature, able to rejoice even in the fatality of his growth.169

And again,

And perhaps the phrase "the sense of glory" sums up best of all Thomas's characteristic mood. Unlike Eliot, he accepts the man as he is, and finds him, (though guilty and sometimes terrible) wonderful, exciting, mysterious, and linked in all sorts of fascinating ways with all of time and space; and he has found a technique powerful enough to express that acceptance in some of the most arresting poetry of our time.

It seems inevitable that any attempt to describe Thomas's poetry as opposed to describing a series of individual poems, is doomed to deal in abstractions so general that they lose any sense of the created richness of any one poem. The 'themes' are few enough and critics rightly question how a poverty of theme is overcome:

But the same theme: how does it continue to excite even as it grows sparser and more self-evident? From Birth, Life, Death it is whittled down to Life-Death; and eventually, we imagine, simple to Life, for even Death with Mr. Thomas becomes only another aspect of Life.170

170 R. H. Bowden, Poetry Quarterly, XIV (Winter 1952/53), 126.
The answer suggested here is that each poem is a renewal of the experience that has been abstracted and called theme:

If Mr. Thomas's approach to it were philosophical and analytical it would have died long ago, but the experience is perpetually renewed and perceived afresh (only very occasionally consciously repeated - when the heart of the poem flags) that the life really does remain alive, the content of the poetry remains palpable and sensual. For the poetry is existential rather than metaphysical: it is lived through in the flesh rather than the mind.

The TLS echoes this and adds the important feature of the recreation of childhood:

Several of his finer poems draw on his memories of the exaltations and terrors of being a boy. The glories of childhood are the theme of the incomparable 'Fern Hill'... It is no wonder that when Mr. Thomas turned to writing his own story in prose he produced a memorable book, for in a sense all his poetry is autobiographical. And richly as he can draw on his childhood for memories, his poetry is evidence that he is receptive to experience now as he was then. 'Poem in October', which is probably his highest achievement, is a celebration of his thirtieth birthday. Few poems have such a power of evocation.171

Too great an emphasis on theme only underlines what was said of Eighteen Poems and can be said of all the volumes, that his subject matter (that is, the areas of experience in which his imagination works) is limited to a point at which it can be summarised in a sentence:

There are really only three subjects treated: (i) childhood, and the associated topic of what it is like to remember one's childhood; (ii) the viscera; (iii) religion,

and detailed almost as briefly:

The second, the viscera, is of course an important subject, and the early poems with their obsessive concern with anatomy and crude physical sensation are fine and valuable poems, but here again you can say the last word, and say it pretty quickly. Thomas has added almost no good love poetry to the language, because he always seems to treat sexual love as an affair of glandular secretions and the mingling of fluids, which is only true as far as it goes.

and,

The third subject, religion, seems to me Thomas's worst pitch; he never succeeds in making me feel that he is doing more than thumbing a lift from it. Indeed it is only a helpful subject to him in those poems which are content to leave every important matter to be settled by the reader: the line "After the first death, there is no other", has been praised as an example of significant ambiguity... and no doubt that is very valuable, but if a poet is going to be a religious poet there has (one would think) to be a little more definition about it.172

Eventually, criticism which demands too strictly that poetry should make statements on a wide range of thought reduces the poetry to a minor level:

A hallmark of a major poet is fecundity of ideas, variety of theme, range and vision; the "I", as in Hardy, is a mask through which the poet speaks, and speaks intelligibly with largeness and nobility of utterance to and for all men; it is never the merely subjective and personal pronoun. Except in a handful of poems, already too much eulogized and anthologised, this major quality seems to be missing. After all the caul, wombs, processes of parturition and "I smelt the maggot in my stool", it seems that this writer has discovered two truths, that we all have sexual organs and that we shall most assuredly die.173

While this is an overstatement of the situation, there is enough truth to show that Thomas's popularity cannot be the result of recognition of an intellectual poet grappling with the philosophical problems of the day. Throughout the reviews of Collected Poems there is an

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172 John Wain, Mandrake, II (Summer-Autumn 1953), 261. Reprinted in his Preliminary Essays.

acknowledgement of the limited and repetitive nature of his experience which would be tedious to recount in full.

It is just as obvious that the reviews are proportionally more involved in discussion of the structure and fabric of the poems; his capacity to illuminate and make uniquely significant some aspect of a limited subject appeals, and we see the related danger of failing to create the experience convincingly, leaving a mass of words which heave about and assault the reader but without co-ordinated and meaningful effect. A sample of the comments of the period shows that opinion varies on the value of what has been achieved, but critics largely agree on the way the poems work towards a sensuous reconstruction of the poet's experience. But it is a method which is rightly said to present difficulties if approached in the wrong way:

It is the reader soaked in the traditional style who finds him the more incomprehensible. Perhaps the reason is that the traditionalist brings into play and relationship only that compartment of his mind labelled 'Poetry'. The uninitiated relate him by association and comparison with personal experience and the word-images often seem to focus astonishingly, obtaining an unmistakable response. Whether the term 'traditional' is meaningful or is immaterial, but there can be an antipathy towards the method which results in an attitude which offers small possibility of change:

Dylan Thomas's extravaganza in adjectives tends to make much of his poetry akin to the obstacle race, thus detracting from the pleasure one should derive from poetry. It may be laudable to swing to the other extreme from the coldly academic technique of poetry, and produce poems over-emphasising physical fundamentals in crudely-coined language; many lines seem intermediate, minus real beginning or ending, as disjointed rantings of a bombastic egotist in a fury, virile and barbarous though they may be.


This exchange in The Poetry Review is mainly over Geoffrey Johnson’s statement that "Communication is the essence and ultimate criterion of art," which is unprovocative on its own, but which raises the further questions of what must be communicated and what methods of communication are acceptable. If it is accepted that any experience which will affect the reader, be it intellectually, emotionally, by a satisfying response, is worth communicating, and if the measure of communication is pragmatic, there is no difficulty in accepting that Thomas’s poetry at least merits attention. A reader who is not able to accept such wide terms of reference for poetry is not likely to appreciate Thomas much:

The splitting up into irregular lines of poetic (?) ideas expressed in not too good prose does not make poetry .... I like poetry to express something sharply and clearly; mysticism is allowable, but surely we do not want a poem so wrapped up in it that it is almost a foreign language. No doubt the modern idea I am wrong, but I always thought poetry was originally intended to express a sentiment, thought, story, emotion, with a minimum of words, clearly and concisely and that metre and rhyme was an aid to this end and to memory.176

Thomas’s poetry is of a kind which eventually can be judged only by the criterion of personal response and will consequently always be a source of sterile dispute, but it is necessary to understand more clearly its nature and its strengths and weaknesses than the correspondents to The Poetry Review do. Although few critics give a coherent account of how the poetic experience is created out of images actively stimulated by the poet's response to an occasion, several elements of the method are recorded and commented on.

Appreciation can be looked upon as an intuitive response:

To understand that part of his work which is truly difficult, the same intuitive study is required as for any other unusual work of art. The image in a couple of words playing on one's mind may unravel into the images of association and contradiction that went into its making. The vision in a single line, particularly a "first" line, living for a time in one's life, will inevitably bring the desire to know the second - and the third.  

The response is to the creative power of the images:

The words themselves in these later poems seem to take on their own life and push and elbow each other along both musically and visually with an even greater ease and inevitability than before. If the language of the early poems had its own flesh and blood which gave it substance and movement, the language of the later poems has acquired its own heart and brain which, operating from inside it, direct and organise it even more closely. Often it seems as though each word were fathered musically by its predecessor, each phrase mothered by some preceding one.  

Faced with a method that is so dependent on association and sensuous delight, one critic describes it as if the act of creation were like making broth:

Mr. Thomas scoops up symbols from the sea, the Welsh countryside, the Bible, psychology, and a few other things, tossing them together as he pleases. They all become his own and follow his rules, assuming double meanings and triple connotations if he requires it.  

The broth turns out to be a warlock's brew, no more a matter of critical evaluation than a warlock is governed by natural laws:

Mr. Thomas is a warlock, as a poet should be, and no matter how he chooses to construct his poems, when he takes hold of an old theme - love or joy or the fear of death or the reach for God - it turns magically new and flashes like the phoenix.

177 John Craddon, see above, footnote 174.
178 R. H. Bowden, see above, footnote 170.
Most of the comments on the fabric of imagery and the interplay of words are expressed as if the reader were witnessing a display.

The way Thomas turns his poems into a virtuoso performance colours the analysis of his work and is sometimes explicitly recognized:

Thomas savours his tongue. It is a prime organ with him. Anyone who has heard him read (and who hasn't? and who hasn't, should) remembers the strong syllabic drunkenness (something of an orgy), the craze of sound sometimes running against the flow and the clear sense (something Swinburnian). "Over Sir John's Hill", typically Thomas, is thoroughly rhymed and thoroughly assonanced and thoroughly reined and pranced. The swash of the lines buckles nicely at the joints.180

Although the comment is adverse in tone, the rhetorical exhibition of "immediate words" is approved:

Latin-syllables, the drawn-to-conclusion words, are rare. This precise aversion, or avoidance, is a virtue (to an unexampled and unexpected degree) in his work: it prevents poems of a strong opening cloudiness from being completely overcast and closed. The words are immediate words, the "spray", as Dr. Williams might say, of our life, and they enter, even if not with utter distinctness, with friendliness and frankness and distinctness into the listening consciousness .... As rhetorical as such language may become, as tortured for sense, as cramped for the sake of keeping to form, the very choice of the words, whatever their usage, and the clear-cut heavy rhythms bring a familiarity.

Eventually Gorman finds the exhibition pall, the entertainer tries too hard and the result is repetition to the point of hypnotised tedium:

He often rides his rhetorical genius too hard and it pants too obviously (as in "Poem on His Birthday": the celebration is a hog). There is a reluctance to win new ground. Poems like "Fern Hill" or "Poem in October" or "In My Craft or Sullen Art" ... rely on rhetorical devices that sometimes run shallow and use sentimentality to the point where the reader questions sincerity. There is, in these tricks, a sense of self-

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idolatry that no amount of whimsy or good humour can wholly contradict. The rhythms are heavy and prompt repetitiousness. And even a poem as good as "Over Sir John's Hill" overplays itself in onomatopoeic effects ... Thomas can hypnotise the listener, but there is a loss; Thomas intends more than intonation and the high-pressured phrasing must yield, if the poem is to move with a deep effect.

By questioning Thomas's 'sincerity', he refers to the impression sometimes given that the poem as performance lacks the personal commitment of the writer to the experience: there are so many rhetorical flourishes that the reader doubts the involvement of the poet. As a result the reader's imagination is not extended much by the penetration of the experience into his being; the commonplace that one is never quite the same after reading a good poem does not always apply if the poet merely elaborates an impressive verbal structure and the reader merely spectates.

The idea that Thomas's poems are performances is closely related to their religious tone, for the manner in which he presents his material is frequently worshipful, praising the creation of an Old Testament God because he not only would be a "damn fool" if he did not, but also because many poems become an act of consecration in reaction to the puritanism and pharisaism of the Welsh chapel:

Thomas is a religious poet. He sings his 'Te Deum' in a vaulted cathedral, lit by sparkling tapers, where the priest presents the elements of life, the fruit of the vine, and the bread of the field, in unbloody, bloody sacrifice.161

Davies writes of a "more positive and fruitful acceptance of Christian imagery" in the later poems, and of a predominantly Catholic

nature, but it would be wrong to accept his alignment of Thomas with other religious poets too completely:

Dylan Thomas is a religious poet in the line of Vaughan, Herbert, Donne and Hopkins, and it is not hard to conjecture, that in a kindlier, more congenial atmosphere, he would no doubt have taken his place as one of the great poets of Christendom. He has the turbulence of a Donne, he is slowly attaining the serenity of Vaughan. He has reacted violently, superbly, richly to the stifling cold, gloomy piety of a decaying puritanism. He, unlike Caradog Evans, did not turn on it in his rage, flaying their lustful impiety and soul-destroying pharisaism, but rather turned away to sing a 'Te Deum Laudamus,' for all created things.

While all he says that directs our attention to the poetry as an act of celebration expressed often in a religious vocabulary and noticeably dependent on Biblical imagery and reference to the central beliefs of Christianity, is acceptable, the inference that a faith such as Donne's or Vaughan's inspires and integrates the poems is misleading. A more specific and penetrating faith establishes a clearer relationship between man and God: it is found in "the great poets of Christendom," but not in Thomas. His God is a pervasive force which, in "Over Sir John's Hill," has difficulty in embracing the killer, the "hawk on fire" with the same mercy as the sparrow. God emerges pantheistically from the service of the natural world conducted by the poet, the "young Aesop fabling," and the "saint heron hymning." His religiousness involves no conceptualisation of the role of Christ beyond occasional references and two series of poems, the "Altarwise by owl-light" sonnets and "Vision and Prayer", but in neither sequence is Christ evident as an orthodoxy recognisable and independent figure. The identification of poet with Christ has been argued to be acceptable, but unless religious poetry establishes the separately meaningful existence of a God, separate, that is, from
both the individual and the world, what he has created is very limitedly Christian and restricted in the religious significance it will have for a reader.

The religiousness of the later poems is mainly a matter of striking attitudes and of imagery and diction; it is therefore plainly observed as a feature of the poetry's 'display', the tail of the peacock, attractive but attracting for a purpose other than admiration of the feathers. The element of showmanship is particularly a feature of the later poems, for although the early ones appear "showy", they are too concerned with self-exploration for him consciously to "sing/To you strangers" in a "burning and crested act."

These changes in the style and direction of his poetic effort are noted by several reviewers and categorized by W. Y. Tindall:

Chronologically arranged, this collection allows us to survey his development. His work falls into three periods that should satisfy the most academic demands upon a poet - as Thomas and I decided one afternoon last year in a bar on West 23rd Street.182

The exclusive chumminess of Tindall's remark is a regrettable feature of his article, but his division of the work into three periods is workable; the first, the period of 'womb' and 'tomb', gave rise to a poetry of impressionist character:

In the early poems, which concern birth, death, and all the trouble of adolescence, a dazzling confusion of images produces a sudden experience that precedes the understanding. Maybe it is best to submit to it with a kind of alert surrender.

In these poems, Freudian and Biblical images give meanings which "quarrel with the indefinite surface" (an obscure statement), and lines like "limbs that had the measure of the worm" dazzle with their

182 W. Y. Tindall, American Scholar, XXII (Autumn 1953), 486.
wealth of meaning, "birth, death, fall, redemption, erection and resurrection." The obscurities of these gave way during the war to different poems and then to the radiant poems of the third period:

Thomas emerges from these obscurities during the war, 'Ceremony after a fire raid' is typical of the second period. And as for the third, distinguished by a wry acceptance of marriage and of growing older, it may be called the period of humanity. 'Fern Hill' one of the most radiant lyrics in the language is a poem of how it felt to be young. But what is meant by "the long-legged bait" or the "white giant's thigh" is less immediately clear.183

Tindall's uncertainty over two of the later poems emphasises the risks of defining too rigorously the 'periods' of any writer, and especially of one so erratic and varied as Thomas. When Eighteen Poems contains a poem as accessible as "The force that through the green fuse" alongside one as obscure as "Our eunuch dreams," and Deaths and Entrances includes the clotted lines of "Vision and Prayer" with the singing clarity of "Fern Hill", it is as unwise as it is unhelpful to arrange the poems into chronological divisions.

It is nonetheless possible and constructive to describe kinds of poems which are related by style and content and to discern a 'coming clear' in most of the later poetry:

It is impossible for me to judge the early poetry of Dylan Thomas, because I find it incomprehensible, The delight in images and words and the sense of form are there, but who can make anything intelligible out of:

These boys of light are curdlers in their folly,  
Sour the boiling honey;  
The jacks of frost they finger in the hives ...

One has a picture of images voraciously feeding on images.184

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183 Tindall's comment on these poems is exasperatingly unhelpful, and representative of a gratuitous and ingratiating biographical tone adopted in some articles:

It was at a bar, while Mrs. Thomas waited next door, that Thomas explained both of these poems; but if I were to tell you what he said about them, I should be guilty of the "intentional fallacy".

184 See above, footnote 167.
And again:

There came a point when Mr. Thomas touched earth again, and his images focused on the objects which the human eye sees, giving them an added radiance and intensity. One imagines this happened during the war, when common things were so precious to us in our fear that they might be destroyed at any moment.

Thomas's progress is elsewhere treated in greater detail with regard to his attitudes and understanding:

To read the poetry from cover to cover is to progress steadily from the swaggering self-assurance of adolescence hiding a complexity of uncertainties, through a quest for the ideal of a happiness that vanished with childhood, towards new understanding of the true meaning of existence.185

Owen believes that Thomas came to regard death as the "logical termination of man's earthly endeavours and the gateway to peace" instead of with horror, and came to invest his vision of the condition of man with a sense of the past so that "the present is the brighter for the recollections of the glories of a childhood that cannot be repeated." Thus far, he is sound, but makes the common error of trying to make Thomas too intellectual when he compares him with Hopkins; the connection is his "single-minded pursuit of an explanation in spiritual terms of the moral and physical dichotomy that bedevils the universe."

The clarification which was widely recognized is neither uniform nor a termination of development. A sense of dissatisfaction with the latest poems, the eight additional poems found in Collected Poems emanates from their seeming forced and their stylistic features being adventitious:

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185 Evan Owen, "Dylan Thomas," The Fortnightly CLXXII (1952), 419.
One notices too ... that the early elaborate manner seems to reach its climax in some of the Map of Love poems, and that, on the whole, Deaths and Entrances appears to be a more uneven collection than the four or five best poems in it would suggest. There is, I think, far less of the war in Deaths and Entrances, than most people seem to imagine. Even such an excellent lyric as "A refusal to mourn" depends for much of its strength on a certain forcing of attitude on the part of the writer, in which the rhetorical gesture is stronger than the compassion .... It is likely that Thomas has been influenced by the public readings of his own and other people's verse which he has given in recent years. The later poems fall too easily into a kind of vocal cadenza, and like most forms of platform oratory, don't look nearly so good on paper. One misses the intellectual tightness of the earlier poems for all their faults of style and overcrowding.186

And also,

In some of the most recent poems the scansion seems to have become entirely accentual, the tone rhapsodic, the gesture very large and sweeping; the verse proceeds by leaping from one epithet to the next over an emptiness of uncounted small words:

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! Among their cocks like fire the red fox
Burning:187

Praise of technical proficiency predominates in reviews and articles which maintain a strong emphasis on the skills of the "art or sullen craft." Because it is his practice to conceptualise from a series of images rather than to express concepts in images, so much depends for the success of a poem on the effectiveness of the form, structure and imagery in creating the experience the poet is undergoing, rather than recording it. Without technical success there is no poem, because the experience as Nemerov points out, is missed:

187 Howard Nemerov, see above, footnote 166.
Finally, there is an emptiness to a considerable part of this large rhetoric . . . by which the poet excites at first and bores presently. Many of these poems go nowhere, fail to develop a subject, their gesture cannot conceal that the world of this poetry . . . is the shifting world of water and air. In it, solid shapes dissolve, and the most energetic rhapsody fails to convince at the end of some poems that anything has happened. The great temptation of lyric poetry is to the dramatic posture, the dramatic gesture, unwitnessed by any drama, and many of Thomas's poems succumb constantly.

Equally, the effective significance of particular images is vital to the significance of the poem, so that failure is serious:

If it is first in virtue of a likeness that we compare two objects, there remains the other side of it, that we can so compare them because they are after all, two objects, and not one. Thomas in his figure-making obeys his subject - the cyclical transformations of life into death and death into life - to such a degree that any thing may be compared with any other thing, for the sole reason, sometimes, that any thing may be supposed to be any other thing . . . . It is rather metempsychosis than metaphor, and between feathers and iron he frequently takes no steps at all, and allows the reader the mere conjunction of the two for evidence of a likeness. Though there are fine hits, that does not ennoble the misses.

Nemerov is usefully pointing to two vital factors in Thomas's poems without which he fails adequately to realise or communicate the central experience. Firstly the words do not merely record an experience that has been lived through, but are engaged in an active reconstruction of what it is like to live through that experience. Thus Thomas needs to be very careful to ensure that the images are sufficiently grounded in a real or linguistic relationship with their subject that can be recognised by any intelligent reader; and also, the experience, once established, has to relate significantly to what is familiar to the reader, not in the sense of being a restatement of a common awareness, but of being recognisably a feature of their common humanity. Its significance lies in how far the reader is
surprised into a new awareness of the condition of man and the nature of life.

A poem in which images operate in isolation from each other and produce meanings which barely appear to create a core of meaning, fails to communicate, and leaves us, like Edwin Muir, unable to judge. We have a picture of images consuming images. A poem in which the experience is insignificant because it does not engage us in sharing the response to a situation, or which does not alter our awareness of life, may communicate successfully but will leave us dissatisfied. Much criticism is consequently devoted to questioning how well the poetic method activates a living experience, but less is said of the value of the experience because of the difficulty of stating precisely the value of a largely emotional and sensuous experience. Hence critical terms predominate which do not define the ultimate emotional significance of the poems but which allude to the attitude evoked, to the atmosphere created and to such ineffable feelings as wonder, radiance and horror which form the total impact.

There are many comments which demonstrate a widespread critical tentativeness and inability to do more than gesture towards the qualities of the verse; even where the tone is convinced, the qualities concern attitudes and abstract concepts of emotional states:

I would say that a good deal of the poetic tension in Mr. Thomas's work comes from a tug in him between an impulse of desperate sadness and one of joyous assertion, and from his great skill at finding verbal patterns that give play to both the impulses at once. The "doubts and confusions", if not the "crudities" are part of this quality.188

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188 G. S. Fraser, "Craft or Sullen Art," New Statesman and Nation, XLIV (1952), 640.
Although he finds that the "magnificent sonority" distracts the reader from asking questions, he asserts that there is a set of themes. Fraser considers that a set of themes exists, but is unconvincing in his description of them:

Dylan Thomas tends to be an excuse among some of his devotees for a revival of the "pure sound" fallacy: "It is so lovely to listen to, and does it matter whether it means anything?" So it is important to say that, apart from that humane and pious purpose, he has a theme, or a set of themes, which cannot be so forthrightly stated. The easiest way to think of the theme is as a kind of reciprocal equation between man and nature, tending to bestow in natural decay a human pathos and on human appetite a natural dignity .... This is not, however, just the pathetic fallacy over again, but a tenable philosophic attitude, which Mr. Empson had called a "pessimistic pantheism": dualism is false, and the forces shaping human and natural existence are not just poetically comparable but actually the same.

The philosophic truth of Thomas's attitude remains doubtful, but by saying how the "reciprocal equation" bestows pathos and dignity, Fraser is influenced by the way the poetry induces response rather than thought - response to pathos, dignity, sonority and so on, not to the philosophic basis of the verse. Thus Fraser can conceive of the equation as the basis of "a rich ambiguous religiosity" in which everything is mortal and sacred; in brief, it leads to religious feeling not to religious thinking.

Elsewhere, the critics consistently point to the sensuous basis of the poetry:

And the language is sensual and emotional rather than cerebral both in its music and in its imagery. It is typified by the usual verbal high spirits which are still capable of transforming a well-worn phrase ("When I was a windy boy and a bit"), by the same suggestion of overtones and ambivalence of phrases ("a hoot owl in the looted (fluted) elms", or "as the vale (veiled) mist rides (rises) through the haygold stalls") which suggest that Mr. Thomas is thinking with several senses at once.\(^\text{189}\)

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189 R. H. Bowden, see above, footnote 170.
Bowden also refers to the "peculiar sense of vibrancy" and the immediacy of "both the sensory and emotional experience" of the best poems.

But the difficulty of criticising poetry whose final impact is ineffable can lead to an inflated critical response; the recognition of the bardic qualities, the hynmal tones and "an absolute kinship with urges beyond rational definition" excites an over-loaded description of the poetry:

His poems merit all our praises, and with their collection one has the sense of a completed phase in a meteoric history, whose beginning was so striking that imagination boggles at the thought of further reaches. The poems in this volume are developments of the original rush of energy which exploded in 1934, upon a literary situation dominated by the "social consciousness". Thomas has the bardic consciousness: he writes a personal lyric in which the sense of his own history and name is surrounded by strange lights and gloom, and if his poems are often obscure, it is that they obey nocturnal laws. His poetry exists in a world in which the sexual forces of nature, the shifting tides and currents for which the individual cannot fully account but to which the passion of his being is finally responsible, override the merely personal clamour.190

While it is right to contrast Thomas's poetry with the very different work of his contemporaries, the rest of this comment indicates that where the verse is thought to be unanalysable, any exaggerated description or claim can be made. Fortunately, clear and unpretentious commentary can define the poetry's quality simply by stating the effects encountered:

The sense of loss runs like a mine through most of Thomas's poetry but it is almost always at some point shafted for light where the poet is remembering Ann Jones, or refusing to mourn the death, by fire, of a child in London, or recollecting his "green and golden" childhood or refiguring the fall of man. He knows that his hand, like Lear's, "smells of mortality", but his imagination needs no sweetening 'ounce of civet'.191


Sweeney makes no huge claims on Thomas's behalf, but restricts his review to recording his appreciation of the "loud, round Sunday sounds" and the simplicity of the childhood vision:

This is perhaps the way it all began. A country childhood and a countryside brimful of the joys which make the child and countryside one through the stirred imagination. Birds and streams and stones and ancient beliefs and Adam and Eve and God.

A common feature of most attempts to evaluate the poetry is that the critic is reduced to recording the individual impact of the presentation and experience of a poem:

One is captured in these poems by a lyricism that alternately soothes and disturbs the ear with its subtle and provocative cadences, and one is almost overwhelmed by the richness and abundance of the imagery, but it is not for these qualities alone that Thomas's work is remarkable. His belief in man's dignity and his reverence for the Absolute are marvellous too.192

While such comments can be descriptively helpful to the reader, they do not satisfy the need for normative criticism; when an evaluation is attempted, the claims made for Thomas often appear to be based upon an unsubstantiated assertion. When Hainer ranks Thomas as highly as "second only to Yeats and Blake as a radical romantic" and as a "major force in modern English poetry," one has to question the basis of the evaluation:

It is impossible to estimate the size and scope of Dylan Thomas's influence. He was already a precursor of the now current "romantic rebellion" in English poetry when the major poets of the thirties - Auden, Spender, MacNeice - were having their greatest vogue. When they were realistically opposing the concentration camp order, he, with the aid of Welsh folklore, was imaginatively postulating a more desirable, but forever unrealizable world - one peopled with giants and fairies, and proclaiming the joy and magic of the natural order.

A more convincing estimate of the poetry's significance than that it postulates a magic world peopled with giants and faïres, is needed, and yet it is easy to understand why there often is a lack of precision in the estimations of Thomas's status when one can readily agree with John Wain that he does not always care whether his meaning is precise - even if he is not the "divinely inspired simpleton" he is sometimes made out to be:

His association in the public mind with Miss Sitwell, who is simply not interested in the ordinary processes of being intelligent, has helped to put this nonsense about, but it is obvious to anyone who reads the poems carefully that Thomas puts into them a good deal of common-or-garden cleverness and capability of the breadwinning, examination-passing type, not a fanciful third-dimensional 'poetic' afflatus. 193

Wain's approach is comparative:

The superb balance of rhymes in 'The Conversation of Prayer', for instance, is something to be grateful for; doubly so when one thinks that Thomas came of a literary age at a time when the typical successful poet was getting away with lines like these:

You who go out alone, on tandem or on pillion, Down arterial roads riding in April . . .

Compare:

Once it was the colour of saying Soaked my table the uglier side of a hill . . .

If the Thomas passage shows the tendency towards over-richness and artfulness... one forgives it at once by comparison with the utter nullity of the other extract ... In the criticism of contemporary literature, one's standards are bound to be, essentially, comparative.

His is a moderate assessment, timely enough to set against the inflated response, but not indicative of the poetry's significance to its readers.

193 John Wain, see above footnote 171.
There is no system of thought, no moral, political or social awareness to be discussed and evaluated in the poetry, although the relevance of Thomas's perspective on the world can be considered. The principal feature which can be judged is the significance of the attitudes and feelings explored and created in terms of the insight and heightened awareness of his life that it may give a reader. The activity of the reader is again vital, the elements of diction, imagery, metre, and sound patterns being effective only in that they provoke responses in him which correlate with the poet's own response to the experience. Only those critics who acknowledge the active relationship between poem and reader based on an emotional and sensuous response can evaluate it convincingly by recognizing its essential limitations. The techniques of stimulating the right responses become the most discussed features, with a wide acceptance that the maturing of his techniques into a more accessible expression has strengthened his ability to engage the reader and that the emergence of better defined situations has directed his creative vigour in a more purposeful way. He better integrates theme and manner than in many of the early poems, as in the "Wordsworthian brightness of the childhood poems" as against the "Gothic elaboration" of the earlier ones.  

Criticism which does not show appreciation of the limitations of poetry conceived subjectively and eventually dependent on a subjective emotive response inflates the value of the poetry and the status of the poet, while criticism based upon a failure or

194 John Davenport, "Dylan Thomas," Twentieth Century, CLIII (February 1953), 142.
refusal to be emotionally and sensually receptive and to engage the imagination in sharing the reconstruction of an experience is aware only of noise, furious verbal activity, contrived forms and a lack of 'dead'. The former is responsible for statements like this:

In all its complexities, his theme is of the wonder of the world, and its mystery. To that wonder and that mystery Dylan Thomas gives praise, praise that in its seed and much of its flowering has immortality. It makes his work of major stature and importance and the publication of his collected poems one of the literary events of the century.195

The latter provokes the antagonism of the Scrutiny critics:

Only the strictest self-criticism and self-discipline could have led Mr. Thomas to put his exuberant verbal energies to effective poetic use. As it is, his progress has been swift, confident and disastrous, though disastrous may seem the wrong word to use in speaking of the career of a poet who, spurred on by general acclamation, may be expected to continue to exhibit his mastery of intricate verse-forms for years to come.196

There is indisputable evidence in the reaction to Collected Poems of "general acclamation", but it is quite evident that the various dissenting voices and the amount of adverse criticism are sufficient to show the falsity of notion that the volume secured critical acceptance of Thomas as a great poet. In fact, there is a manifest reluctance or inability amongst many to commit themselves to the evaluation which his death and the realisation that a final assessment was needed were shortly to force upon his public.

195 J. O. Thomas, see above, footnote 158.
196 R. Mayhead, see above, footnote 163.
Dylan Thomas's death in November 1953 established *Collected Poems* as his final collection, containing by his own account, all the poems he wished to preserve at the time. By the close of 1954, the flurry of critical and biographical activity precipitated by his death was finished, but with no settled assessment of his status. Much of the work of this period is biographical, to do with the 'legend,' a phenomenon not relevant here except inasmuch as it is parallel to the phenomenon of his poetic reputation. The obituary notices are variously toned, from the dramatic gesture of Edith Sitwell's telegram:

To the greatest poet of the younger generation lying in his grave I send devotion undying as his poetry is deathless, to the measured sense of loss which Edwin Muir felt:

His early poetry was obscure beyond understanding. He fished on the banks of the river of the unconscious, and his catch was probably incomprehensible to himself. Yet the sense of delight which was his great quality was present in these poems too, though obscured by the ambiguous waters out of which he drew it. Like every poet he grew articulate by making clear to himself the world of his imagination. His poetry emerged from semi-darkness into the radiance of "Poem in October" and "Fern Hill", which have delighted his own generation and are bound to delight generations to come. How far he might have gone beyond these triumphs and the moving poem, in quite a different vein, refusing to mourn the death by fire of a child in London, no one can say. But his death silenced a voice which might have said such universal things even more simply and beautifully. 197

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An obituary should record the critics present assessment of Thomas's final achievement (although not necessarily the critic's final assessment); it is an opportunity for him to step back and view the whole scene, knowing it to be almost complete.\textsuperscript{198} If the comments are generalized, they at least clarify the sympathies of critics towards the poetry; thus Cyril Connolly confirms that he has come to appreciate Thomas as a good story-teller and "above all things a visionary in love with God and life and the magic of words, an inspired craftsman magnificently ill-equipped for a materialist society."\textsuperscript{199}

And thus Derek Stanford regrets the loss to the poetic imagination of the nation:

\begin{quote}
Indeed, it is as a phenomenon of nature rather than a manifestation of art that his poetry is at first best regarded. In his deep sense of primitive unction lay the effective power of his appeal. It is possible that he wrote no more than half a dozen first rate poems, but these have all the plangency and pathos of some great aria from a famous opera. Elemental, and yet possessed of a rhetoric that played fast and loose with grammar, his verse at its best had a way of stating things with a dramatic simplicity.\textsuperscript{200}
\end{quote}

It is obvious that these assessments were registering that Thomas's final appeal is to the reader's sense of wonder and delight in the elemental beauty of Thomas's vision and the impression made by his incantatory style:

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{198} The extra poems in Dylan Thomas: The Poems edited by Daniel Jones do not materially affect the judgements that can be passed on Thomas on the evidence of Collected Poems.
\textsuperscript{199} Cyril Connolly, The Sunday Times, November 15, 1953, p.5.
\textsuperscript{200} Derek Stanford, "Two Men of Poetry," Church of England Newspaper and the Record, LXII (December 11, 1953), 5.
\end{flushleft}
He was in every sense a bard - a minstrel-poet whose verse was written to be chanted, whose chant was intended to move us, to reach us, before everything, through those feelings which spring from nature, and which modern civilisation is calculated to kill.\footnote{Kathleen Raine, \textit{New Statesman and Nation}, XLVI, 594.}

Kathleen Raine finds the poetry is full of "the essence of worship," based on a vision innocently free from irony, in which, the whole range of that intense phase of experience that lies between childhood and manhood has, in his poems, its for all time complete statement, and in which is found an atmosphere of "Homeric emotions" and "relics of a preliterate poetry."

The quality of sound, the role of the poet-singer, of the bard also impressed John Arlott who, in a mainly biographical obituary writes that to broadcasting,

he brought a voice of stinging yet mighty quality which spoke of the patient craftsmanship in every syllable of well-made poetry. He knew that great poetry was fashioned material. Poetry - or the basic slag of it - welled out of him, but his finished poem was the result of long working over, with care to every syllable, its weight, its place within the pattern, and its sound-value within the bugle tone of his voice, balanced, and given its fullest possible power. This poetry was of the bard and the thinker, the actor and the singer. Its lines, especially as his voice sent them, echo down the memory:

We heard the sea sound sing, we saw the salt sheet tell . . .

\ldots{} the wild boys innocent as strawberries.

Pale rain over the dwindling harbour
And over the sea wet church the size of a snail
With its horns through the mist . . .

Shape all her whelps with the long voice of water,
That she I have,
The country-handed grave boxed into love,
Rise before dark.

So, in the poetry of Dylan Thomas, image and twin ideas - vision and legend - are welded so closely and so econom-
cally that the skimming reader of hastily turned out prose may so easily lack the patience to uncover — or the intuition to feel — the amalgam of thought and feeling in this work.202

Arlott describes the poetry as an "emotional medium" and refers to the integrity and attitude of Thomas:

He lived to live and write: there his integrity was absolute. Because his roots were in the folk-literature of the Welsh, birth, love, and death were constants in his thought: the concept of death had, for him, awe but not terror. I can hear now his own voice, bugle atop, drumming under, as he came to the measured last line of his own poem —

And the coins on my eyelids sang like shells.

And continuing the same appreciation of the impact of the poetry on the senses, the Manchester Guardian notes that the "beauty of its word-music" is the poetry's most impressive quality, while Stephen Spender reiterates his belief that in unifying flesh, spirit and body and making intellect and sensuality the same thing, Thomas wrote poetry which implicitly denies the assumptions of Marxists and other critics who believe that a poem "can be analyzed as a complex of literary and intellectual influences"; furthermore, he finds the poet's death has created a new significance:

Their difficulty is in any case, not "intellectual": it really lies in their having a kind of portentousness in their insistence on birth, copulation and death which, while the poet was alive, read like the confusion and self-intoxication. To appreciate their gravity, springing out of the poet's death, it is necessary that his life be completed. Without the completion of death they may seem mere conjuring, a trick in a box with a false bottom to it. But in the past few days they have gained extraordinarily in weight and concentration. Every early poem today reads like the poet's epitaph.203

202 John Arlott, Spectator, CXCI (1953), 534.

Insistence on the musicality and sensuous appeal of the poetry marks these obituaries, but is less the subject of the article in
The Times in which the writer remarks how Thomas was an innovator
and yet firmly entrenched in tradition, one who wore "the mask of
anarchy to conceal the true face of tradition":

There was nothing God ever made that Dylan Thomas the
revolutionary, wanted to alter. The careful compounder
of explosive imagery believed only in calm.204

It is certain that although they record the loss of a major figure in
contemporary poetry, these obituary writers were not making falsely
inflated claims but were mainly aware of the eloquent lyricism of the
best poems and of the splendid sounds invoked by a poet of considerable
technical skill. As Spender wrote, Thomas "confronted a time of
organizational and bureaucratic generalizations with a powerful and
fearless personal vision," but it was a vision which appealed more in
its presentation than in its depth of insight into the human condition.
Thomas's familiarity to a large public through lecture tours in the
U.S.A. and radio broadcasts at home furthered this kind of appeal,
and also made more apparent his dependence upon the singing quality
of the verse:

No one who has heard that voice, a voice that could be
tuned to any purpose, will ever be surprised at the
popularity that greeted Dylan Thomas wherever he appeared,
on his lecture tours, public readings, or when broad-
casting. Radio especially, that scientists' dream that
may sometimes be an artist's nightmare, had made him
known to an immeasurably wide public whose usual response
to poetry is suspicion and sometimes even open hostility.205

The positive attitude which pervades his most popular poems combines

204 "Innovation and tradition," The Times, November 10, 1953, p.11.
205 Editorial, Adam, Year 21, No. 238, p.11.
with the verbal dexterity to present not a penetrating analysis of
human behaviour nor a philosophic principle of life, but a per-
spective on narrow but fundamental areas of experience which reveals
less the object and more the response to it; comment is therefore made
on the emotional states appealed to in contemplating the experience:

'The lovely gift of the gab,' he called it; and the
keynotes of Dylan Thomas's work are acceptance and
affirmation: acceptance of the plenitude and joy of
creation, affirmation of that plenitude and joy through
the triumphant faith and lift of his heart and voice.206

Acceptance and affirmation make the later poems,
sing with grandeur and simplicity of the terrible
redeeming beauty of fallen creation, the Yeatsian
vision of 'Gaiety transfiguring all that dead'.

The memorial edition of Adam from which these comments are taken
has many articles of a biographical nature, and the few which are
more involved in criticism constantly maintain the importance of the
emotional basis of the poetry and of the idea that through all the
horror, death and sense of doom comes a joyous assertion of faith:

His ultimate vision is the tragic one of creation through
suffering, his ultimate sense is of joy. In the act of
love, the central act of creation, he will see the force
of love, in man and the world, merge with the force of
death, and yet from this union new creation born through
suffering. His vocation is to remake in terms of
celebration the details of life, to save that which is
individual and thereby mortal by imagining it in terms
of what he conceives to be eternal. The emotion which
drives him will be compassion, or love of life and the
particulars of life.207

Merwin describes Thomas as "primarily a celebrator" who makes and
performs a religious rite, and by recognizing him as a 'makar' he
describes him far more aptly than one who ascribes to him an analytical

206 Linden Huddlestone, "To Take to Give is All," Adam, Year 21,
No. 238, p.44.

power which sounds foreign to the poetry:

We cannot estimate what he might have achieved. His latest work since Deaths and Entrances has shown a greater objectivity and clarity without loss of intensity, and a better control of his verbal dexterity. The dominating quest for light and truth is made with a coherence and consistency that comes from a singleness of purpose. His ruthless self-analysis and pitiless searching bring him face to face with problems which, consciously or unconsciously beset all men. Those who are aware of having to face the same struggle, who take time, 'to arrest for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth' in order to listen to him, are moved by its quality and sincerity. He searches for truth among those obscure forces which, identical in all men, make them feel that, beyond races, philosophies and religions, they are all in the same ark. Stripping his own being of darkness, Dylan Thomas gives to the world his own problems, his own battles, and sometimes his own victories in moving stories and imperishable poetry. To sum up his work, I should quote his own remark to Henry Treece: 'I hold a beast, an angel, and a madman in me, and my enquiry is as to their working, and my problem is their subjugation and victory, down-throw and upheaval, and my effort is their self-expression.'

The tone of this comment is inflated and it suggests a kind of analytic poetry which would demand a far more rigorous intellect than Thomas ever revealed. Merwin's approach is more accurate when he describes the poems as being 'made', and writes of the significance of particular poems in terms of their compassion, the sympathy, the faith and joy, and so on. His discussion of the early poems concludes:

In 'In the beginning', he found what he needed. He sees the creation of the world as a metaphor of the creation of man. He sees the individual man through his divine image, Christ, and sees imaginative creation and natural creation as one.

The aptness of the description underlines the lack of penetration and the bias found in all the poems towards creating significance out of

208 Suzanne Boussilat, "His Work and Background," p.66.
the diverse elements of life he picks up rather than towards working out the significance of what is observed; his poetic world has life only because he has created it and breathed life into it.

Memorials and obituaries cannot be expected to provide much important criticism, for if their purpose is to commemorate the achievements of a man, their import is paradoxically ephemeral. They are mostly biographical in nature, some record personal loss while others aim to settle the status of the poet's work, and a few demonstrate a fulsomeness that repels:

It was on the worst day of this or any other month of the year that he died, and no one knows why . . . .

He has died not because there was no more life left in him, but because the world as it is has become an intolerable place for such a man, and insupportable to such a spirit. . . .

The pathologist's opinion that he died "of a brain ailment of unknown origin" simply illustrates the undisguised intervention of the powers of darkness in our affairs: for this is one of their greatest as it is their latest triumph. With this sleight-of-hand assassination such powers now openly operate among us . . . .

He only died too soon because a man like him would always die too soon. But we are not left with fragments of tremendous mementoes, like the poems of Keats - the truth is that, just as this fable evolved in front of our eyes the wings and fire that proved a whole new dragon of poetry had been born - just as soon as he had done this, he died.209

It is not clear whether we are to consider him to have been a martyr to the powers of evil, an inevitable sacrifice, or a manic depressive, crushed at last by the pressures of the world, but it is quite clear that the statement has nothing to do with the sober evaluation of poetic talent. Yet excessively emotional and inflated response can be found in other articles:

209 George Barker, Encounter, II (January 1954), 9. This issue was devoted to a memorial to Dylan Thomas.
He had a speaking voice of the utmost magnificence, range and beauty, and his speaking of poetry was as sublime as was his writing of poetry... his voice resembles no other voice; the spirit is that of the beginning of created things; there is here no case of a separate imagination, of invention. From the depths of Being, from the roots of the world, a voice speaks.210

Such criticism as there is in Edith Sitwell's writing is repetitive—here she repeats much of her earlier article in The Critic.211—and the poet's death encourages the development of the dramatic gesture to an extravagantly unconvincing level:

Alas, that he who caught and sang the sun in flight, yet was the sun's brother, and never grieved it on its way, should have left us with no good-bye, good night.

I cannot believe that he is dead. It was not until I began this tribute of love to the ever-young, undying Dylan in his grave, that I began to realise that I shall never hear that golden speaking voice, that voice of the lion, the eagle, the dove, the sun, again. But I, too, must not

... blaspheme down the stations of the breath

After the first death there is no other.

There are fortunately articles written at the time of or after Thomas's death which make an obvious effort to assess the poetry in more particular terms than that it "caught and sang the sun in flight," to particularize its character by clarifying its themes and techniques, strengths and weaknesses. The failure of the Edith Sitwell's or Herbert Read's kind of criticism is that it excludes recognizable criteria, and refuses to define the basis of its appreciation, whereas criticism which establishes its bases and which describes the varied nature of the poetry at least describes accurately what is in


211 See above, footnote 130.
the poetry, and at best suggests for what it can be valued:

The artistic excellence of a work is dependent upon whether the conception itself is of value, and upon whether it has so dominated the whole construction of the piece as to be fully realized in it and enhanced by it. When Thomas' power of conception is at its height, when it masters all the elements of the poem, something like sublimity results; when the conception is merely odd, fanciful, or otherwise trivial, or when his handling of it obscures, distorts, or otherwise fails to manifest itself, he fails.212

The incentive to assess the totality of Thomas's work was created by the publication of *Collected Poems*, but determined by his death; the critics recognized a need to give their readers guidance to the completed poetry, and so we find more consideration of it, not as a performance of technical virtuosity which may or may not signify anything, but as an expression of experience, the strength and quality of which is proportional to the effectiveness of the poetic devices in making the experience come alive for the reader. Without wrongly insisting that a poem should conduct a paraphraseable argument Olson sensibly bases his evaluation on the total impact of a poem, on the effective fusion of the elements of the poetic statement with the communicated experience. He is careful to avoid allowing the dualism of style and content to be other than a descriptive convenience, and so avoids the error of elevating the cleverness of techniques over the quality, significance and unity of the experience and vision they express. He explains how a device can indicate thought feeling or character and isolate the qualities of the object imaged, illustrating how Thomas succeeds brilliantly and fails abjectly to achieve the desired effect. Where

he points to technical failure, as in his complaint that themes are unnecessarily concealed by inadequate titling, his criterion is clearly that the experience or thought of a poem should be as accessible as the powerful expression of it will allow; his main impression is that Thomas has variously over-complicated his experience by technique:

It is difficult to say whether he has progressed much or not. There are extraordinarily fine poems in all his phases; but as he eliminates the faults of one period, he acquires new ones in another. His first poems are sometimes unnecessarily obscure through terseness; his later, sometimes obvious and verbose. In his earlier work the thoughts and emotions are sometimes too complex for lyric treatment; in his later, too simple for the elaboration he gives them.

Much criticism has been devoted to the elements of communication rather than the thoughts or emotions expressed, and although it is necessary for the former to be isolated and described, the unity of a poem can be lost unless either the critic relates his analysis to the total poem or the reader remains sufficiently aware that description of techniques is not a critical end but that it should be used as an aid to his understanding the final communication. Equally, the tracing of influences and the delineation of background can only serve to enrichen the reader's reading activity by opening up new possibilities of association and stimulating further responses to the issues, emotions and ideas which may be in the poem. Examination of Thomas's 'Welshness' is a good example of this, for it leads to academic comparisons rather than an enriched reading experience:
His poetry does, however, exhibit—in a loose and imperfect manner—two characteristics of traditional Welsh poetry: 'cynghanedd' and 'dyfalu'. 'Dyfalu' is the heaping up of images to qualify one substantive; 'cynghanedd' is the intricate system of patterned alliterations and assonances... which has characterised the main stream of Welsh poetry for almost a millennium.213

Even the academic interest of such an article is doubtful; the connection between the pervasive religiosity of Thomas's poetry and Welsh Christianity exists, but there is little help in the reader's knowing the 'data upon which the poetry... has been built,' when he can recognize and appreciate the religious imagery without reference to quasi-biographical description of background:

It is not merely the hymn-singing at football matches and in public-houses, though no one pretends this a religious exercise; the profusion of churches and chapels, half empty though they may be; the reverence for death. The countryside and people are permeated with the letter of Holy Scripture—whether as Christian or surnames there are Moses and Samuels and Isaacs in every village, with pure Welsh blood in their veins; the names of the villages themselves are sometimes Biblical, and there is no village without its Bethany or Salem or Zion.

Similarly, Garlick's tracing of connections with Donne, Herbert, Traherne and Hopkins is of passing interest but does not relate to Thomas's poetry other than in a broadly general way.

There is a place for such work, but there is greater value in describing what a writer may say about the temperament of his nation, as, say McDiarmid does in "A Drunk Man Looks at a Thistle." Where Thomas uses much religious imagery it is to express a sacramental perspective of life, not his supposed Welshness; the function of his religious vocabulary is more important than the environment which

provided him with the knowledge of it, just as what he created out of his consciousness of Wales and the Welsh temperament matters above all else. Interpretation of what he creates, however, requires greater precision than is often found:

He never lost his affection for Wales, for the wild unruly ways of its warm-blooded men and women with their earth-bound practices...; nor did he ever have less than liking for their strict impossible rules and their heaven-bound faith. No, he just looked at both these worlds with the incorrigibly innocent eye of the newborn child and the poet, and he saw both sinner and saint, fox and pheasant, bound in the one bundle, incorrupt and uncorruptible as on the first birthday of the world. And the great words fell on their knees to him... Dylan had the innocent eye that kept him unspoiled through years of complicated experience and in worlds of very different values.214

Rodgers insists too much on the word-blown magnificence of an innocent abroad, missing the truth that Thomas lacks moral or philosophic discrimination, that a liberal catholicism based on an emotional relationship with the elements of the universe cannot form an adequate philosophy of life not only because of its conflict and paradox but also because it leads to a soft-centred attitude in which there can be no sense of moral or spiritual toughness: it is all indiscriminating indulgence. Additionally he seems to contradict himself in talking of carefree verbal abandon and the poet's strict control:

His one care was for words - the living, relieving, revealing word. In poetry or prose he could use words with an abandon like nobody else. He could throw them about and toss them up to the dizzy sky - in a great red-roaring, black-foaming race and rush-and-tumble-down of thistleblown words. And usually that is a dangerous thing. Usually, it lands a writer in a mess. But Dylan never missed or dropped a word, no more than he would a child. He knew the weight of

every word to a 't'. More than that... he knew that words were not just playthings, knew that without them the world would have no voice, no name, no shape, no pride of ancestry or hope of posterity. He was the mouthpiece of the world; he was Adam.

If Thomas's poetry is concerned with "the organic unity of all created things," it is unlikely to express such a unity with the abandon of which Rodgers speaks, by "tossing words up to the dizzy sky"; criticism must start from a more precise idea of how the elements of the poetry circumscribe and create the organisms and unity. It is more useful to seek out the significance of particular poems before relating it to a more general perspective on the poetry of a period:

As I see his poetry, it started with what may not unfairly be called an obsession with sexual and prenatal processes - conception, gestation, womb-imagery: a concern with the physical phenomena of creation; and from that gradually developed a religious poetry in which God is recognised as at once the origin and end of all such creativity and fruition in Man. The twin themes of his poetry may be said to be, in fact, sex and religion; and his development has been towards a greater universality of images, a wider concern with human suffering, and a more orthodoxly Christian conception of God: but in essence his work is unchanged.215

Although the method is sound, it must be more rigorously applied than here in order to show the relative importance of the issues involved and the quality of the manner of expressing them, the relationship between what he 'deals with' and the exultant singing quality:

Although he deals largely with personal and individual grief, suffering and death, these things never have for him the last word. Life and death are envisaged as part of the single integrated pattern of existence: 'all', as this poet sees it, 'is best, though we oft doubt.' And this ultimate optimism floods his diction, his imagery, and his rhythms to give us lines that exultantly sing their way into our hearts.

While he indicates the general impact of the poetry, it is in broadly
descriptive rather than analytic terms, a necessary but not compre-
hensive form of criticism which requires a more specific method of
explication to clarify the nature of the poems and to demonstrate how
they act upon the reader and engage his imaginative and critical
faculties. What is needed is a kind of criticism which explores the
creative potential of Thomas's writings, that is the power of some
poems to stimulate the reader into an activity closely akin to the
poet's own imaginative excitement in composition.

An essay in the New Mexico Quarterly Review gives some way towards
answering such a demand. It compares Thomas with T. S. Eliot, but
states that the usual classicist-romanticist distinction does not
consider Thomas's use of puns, allusions and conceits; in their common
awareness of a "prevailing spiritual sterility" Thomas is said to
avoid Eliot's sermonising on spiritual dryness and "can usually be
found by the sea's side, alone, chanting a druidic prayer of rebirth."216

The chant, by close scrutiny of the images, is shown to have its
effect by its suggestiveness, that is, by the creative effort of the
reader's imagination in making the wider extensions of significance
stimulated by the images; sexual symbolism is used to illustrate the
need not to be blinded from seeing wider implications in images,
from seeing the sexual symbolism in its broader context.

Sexuality, after all, symbolizes life, not vice versa. Thomas is certainly aware of this. For example, in a
later stanza of "I see the boys of summer," ... when he
writes "Here love's damp muscle dries and dies," he
intends much more than a mere shrivelling-penis image.
He means, by legitimate extension, that the dampness
(rain, river, sea - any water) of life, which is regenera-
tive, is love's muscle, love's regenerative power, and that
that power, that muscle, dries and dies when men wantonly
crucify the living love ...

216 Myron Osborn, "The Love Song of Dylan Thomas," New Mexico
Quarterly Review, XXIV (Spring 1954), 46.
Oschorn insists that it is wrong to speak of Thomas's sexual obsessions because what we have is a sexual concern which can "lend force and significant ambiguity to certain lines" and because we never find a sexual image functioning solely as a sexual image. By so insisting, he implies support for the contention that the significance of Thomas's poems is only appreciated by an awareness of the multiplying meanings of images in a particular context, but does not mention that where a poem depends too much upon the 'breeding' of images from an inadequate source, the effect is not of an unlimited richness of suggestiveness, but of a circumscribed experience, the imaginative potential of which has been exhausted. When he distinguishes between early and later poems, it is by the development of a "central motivating idea" which restricts the theme to a more formal unity than is seen in the overlapping images and equivocal syntax of the earlier ones. The central idea which persists in Oschorn's interpretation is the quest for love which will give his life a measure of light:

This search for love is the dominant and binding theme of all his poetry. It is, in fact, the underlying theme of all the great Romantics, a theme which will always be necessary in a materialistic culture such as our own.

Thomas is described as a poet who, unlike Wordsworth, works within nature, seeking the possibility of love - "Nature becomes the hallowed place for almost mystical holy communion" - in the shadow of death wrought by the destructive quality of time. Time attacks and destroys love and only in later poems is there said to be a mellowing of his attitude to it.

One reason for the increased potential of the poems to encourage the creative engagement of the reader, was his widening perspective and his developing sense of situation or occasion, and Oschorn's
view of his use of childhood and rebirth describes helpfully the features of the vision arrived at in "Fern Hill" and "Ceremony after a Fire-Ha!d." The latter he believes to be the peak of Thomas's achievement, the subsequent poems showing something of a decline:

In his last seven years Thomas published but seven poems. Good as some of these are, none of them belong with his best. Somehow they lack the conviction of the earlier great poems. Perhaps it is simply that he had already had his say. In these poems echoes of earlier images begin to appear, the shadows in his natural settings become darker, the gloom slowly thickens.

The article does not conclude whether Thomas succeeded in enlightening his life by finding love, but by patient scrutiny of particular poems it confirms more general descriptions of theme and significance. Because the poems seek to describe the effects of experience rather than the details of the experience itself, its success depends upon the richness of the suggestiveness of its meaning, emotional tone and vision; criticism cannot therefore hope to achieve a sharp definition but can usefully describe the effects experienced and the vision shared by the critic. If the reader has not been aware of a similar response, he adds to his experience of the poem and enriches his appreciation of the way it symbolises or alludes to a world of sensuous effects which is not a world of definition but of almost limitless suggestiveness; what limits it has are set by the skill of the poet in inducing an uncritical absorption of his reader in a creative process and by the imaginative agility and emotional susceptibility of the reader. It is in the latter aspect that criticism not only becomes mainly descriptive and unavoidably subjective, but also risks being effete and imprecise.

This important aspect of Thomas's writing is further clarified by
Stephen Spender in another article which succeeds in getting to the
core of his artistic method and in guiding the reader into a workable
approach. In comparing the "greatness of aim" of Thomas and Auden,
he distinguishes between their methods of achieving a common aim of
"putting a whole view of life derived from his whole experience" into
his poetry:

They differed from a theorist using strict forms, like
Mr. William Empson, or a theorist abjuring traditional
forms, like Sir Herbert Read. The dominating passion
of Dylan Thomas was to put as much of his own life as he
personally felt it, of Mr. Auden, as much of the life of
others as he objectively understood it, into his poetry.217

Thomas is said in his best poems to transcend the merely personal
without being impersonal, making his poetry "inseparable from the legend
of himself", as he "declaims his own poetry from the high tower of his
built-up personality"; Auden's method is very different:

His greatness of aim lies not in his personal legend and
self-portrait, but in his understanding of some heart,
not necessarily his own, the social realities and conflicts
outside his personality; he has made his work a poetic
world more recognisably our world than that of any other
living poet.

Because he interprets the world through philosophy, religion, psychology
and symbols which express the "operation of religious, scientific,
psychological and political ideas upon the mind and soul of modern
man," his personality, is not central to his poetry as Thomas's is;
instead there is a "central awareness of a debate between behaviours
and ideas." Spender is not satisfied that the customary terms of
Classicist and Romantic, Apollonian and Dionysian are the right
distinctions, preferring to characterize Auden as a "transparent"

poet, and Thomas as an "opaque".

'Opacity' is used to describe how Thomas does not relate symbol, sound and colour to real things but uses an impressionist technique using "blurred memories of things," "vivid haloed childhood memories," and a religious sense of life very different from Eliot's or Auden's:

Blood and feeling and love are for him surrounded by undisputed concepts of good and evil: bread and wine glowing in high stained-glass windows.

Spender repeats his belief that Thomas needed something real to write about to develop from early monologues of an isolated man in search of a language, "scrapheaps of marvellous junk" to strikingly oratorical poems:

Poems like 'In Memory of Ann Jones' and 'I make this a warring absence' indicate that he needed a real funeral mound and not just a dump of personal symbols from which to make his greatest orations. All is self-reverie or noble monologue, and dialogue does not enter in until the war air-raids, when in 'Deaths and Entrances' there is a sense of voices - even when they are or charred childish corpses mourned over - answering the poet. After this, his technique expands, becomes more varied and complex, less monotonous.

"Oration" reminds us of the dramatic qualities of the poetry and of its organic nature: it contains a "world becoming poetry within his rhetorical personality" (essentially a dramatic and organic process), and reveals the poet, like Rimbaud, as "the object of experiences so intensely lived and felt that through him they attained to an objectivity beyond the merely personal," and becoming a "universalised flesh and spirit." It would be wrong to consider Spender's use of "objectivity" as evidence of a detachment of personality; what must be understood from his remarks and what is consistently demonstrated in the later poems is that Thomas at best achieves a personal expression which does not exclude the reader but rather involves him
in a sharing of the intensely lived and felt experience. It is only by opening his personality out, by offering a communion with the reader that he avoids his early fault of creating a vision which could be observed, not participated in.

Spender's description of Auden's "transparency" helps to clarify his perspective on Thomas:

By transparency in Auden, I mean just the opposite of Thomas's opacity. In Mr. Auden's "Collected Shorter Poems", every line shows a consciousness of human behaviour, literature, analytic systems of thought, dogmas and beliefs which lie beyond, and are revealed through, the texture of the words. Sometimes Mr. Auden is obscure; but his obscurity is of an intellectual kind: it arises through the compression of an idea, or as the result of some private reference which is inadequately explained.

Thomas is recognizable as a poet who synthesises from a set of intuitive responses to life, a world of ineffable sensation and mysterious, not-to-be-questioned forces; when Spender describes the intellectual toughness of Auden, his distinction between the poets becomes clear:

His true theme, running through his poetry, has been the development of a psychological symbolism, redeemed from specialism by poetry, which on the one hand depicts human behaviour and on the other hand interprets it through the psychology, the politics and the theology of love . . .

Mr. Auden is often didactic, but he is by no means an illustrator of ideas through allegory or imagistic poetry. When he writes of ideas his symbolism forms an imaginative synthesis of other specialist symbolist and abstract systems of thought. In his poetry, teacher and learner, doctor and patient, become one in a pattern of the completely imagined. He has gone further than any other modern poet in fulfilling Shelley's dictum that poetry should "imagine that which we know."

The effects of his ability to "imagine that which we know" include the relationship of poet to poetic experience as a "detached, almost clinical observer," and capacity to analyse his understanding of the world; as Spender previously had said, there is a basic difference
between the making of a poem from a worked-out conception and the creation of a vision from the making of a poem. Spender presents an admirable description of vital principles of the methods and perspective of each poet which formalizes and defines characteristics of Thomas's work which have been alluded to or partially worked out before and from which the reader gains a clear and constructive understanding of what the poetry is. He also explains his opinion of the relative value of the poetry arising from such different approaches, being firmly convinced that Auden has "gone further in achieving the main task of contemporary poetry, which is to transmute the anti-poetic material of modern life into transparent poetry." The ways of 'self' and 'not-self' in "transforming the modern world within the contemporary imagination" are divided into,

the way of intensely living the contemporary experience, turning it into the flesh and soul of the poet's own personality, out of which closed world he hammers his romantic poetry; or the way of knowledge, analysis, depersonalisation, and bringing into the area of poetic symbolism the instruments of science and religion which can dissect the modern world. The way of intuition or the way of learning: on the one side Lawrence and Rilke, on the other Mr. Eliot and Joyce.

As a practising poet, Spender presumably was himself subjected to the clear-cut demands he described for the modern poet:

The material environment of our age is in such a constant state of transformation that it demands of the poet - or of any other artist - either that he make the effort to experience it within his personality or to depersonalise himself and understand it with detached intelligence,

and if he sounds too categorical, he satisfies an evident need in the criticism of Thomas's poetry for clear-headed and accurate observation on form, nature and objectives, to counter the disturbing
quantity of uncritical gesturing, that produces only an inflated reputation and the rejection of any serious claim to ability because of a lack of the empathy necessary to respond to such a personalized utterance: (the willingness to engage the imagination in an abandoned, even orgiastic activity) to the dramatic and sensuous submersion of the personality in experience. He is moreover one of the few critics who tried to explain the poetry's value, and one who was conscious of the necessity to approach it through an understanding of its method, the relationship of the poet to his experience and the kind of active response demanded of the reader.

R. N. Maud's thinking is evidently similar; he describes "various characteristics of Thomas's method leading into a discussion of the imagery and meaning of the poems after preliminary attention to poetic form and effects;"*218* his approach is to examine the syntactical structure of poems first because he believes the characteristic construction to involve a series of short, rhetorical phrases which are coherent spoken units and working parts of a sentence. The flow of the verse accords with the "disposition of these varying units and with the corresponding rhythms of persuasive speech," and he argues that it is necessary to take trouble over the organization of the poems:

It is the soundness of the fundamental make-up of Thomas's verse - the easily flowing line within a usually regular form, and the word accentuations of common expressive speech - which urges us to take trouble over the syntax, which is often far from easy, but which, viewed rightly, supplies to the verse a unique vigour and charm.

By examining "I see the boys of summer," Maud concludes that a common feature of the poems is the way a series of verbs and phrases rely

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 upon the retention of a subject presented earlier: "we are made to hold tightly to the beginning of the poem as we proceed through it." He also mentions subject-object inversions as a frequent technique, but maintains that syntactical difficulties are soluble and offer satisfaction to the analytic mind. If he is right, it must be stressed that such satisfaction can only be of secondary importance, being similar to the transient pleasure of solving a crossword puzzle. The correspondences found between the rhetorical phrases and the verse line are said to be less evident in later poems:

The effect is quite different from Thomas's sense-determined lines: the elements of the rhetorical unit are no longer subordinate to its overall coherency and are allowed effects of their own far beyond the simple alliteration, assonance and other customary features of diction that enhanced the earlier verse without attracting undue attention. Now the line-break and lack of punctuation force us to attend to the sense of the single word, or the small group, before and momentarily, quite apart from - the meaning of the whole to which it belongs.

Criticism has previously been made of the arbitrary disruption of the flow of meaning and of the diffuseness of later poems: these faults are here explained to derive from the technique of isolating small groups of words; but Maud is satisfied with the good effects achieved:

Indeed the essence of the whole technique of highly varied line-length, broken rhetorical unit, and minimum of punctuation is to increase the number of points emphasised in a poem, compelling our attention upon more objects and qualities of objects, a technique as appropriate to the later, predominately descriptive poems as the tight series of statements were to the early basically expository poems.

His terms of distinguishing between early and late poems support the contention that the early "tight series of statements" tended to
exhaust the possible connotations of a central image, a self-limiting process which leaves little opportunity for the reader to progress and which prohibits his active participation in the poem; and by suggesting that our attention is drawn to an increased variety of objects and effects, he shows how the later poems demand greater imaginative effort of a reader, and consequently suggest connotations beyond what is immediately conveyed or even consciously recognized. In discussing meaningfulness, Maud's method of interpretation is obviously based upon his observations of the poetic structure and syntactical arrangement; he predictably differentiates between early poems whose unity is on a "conceptual level" and later ones which have a more evident narrative line. His distinction is not new, but is clearly stated: early poems have no real narrative sequence but consist of a series of statements in which "it is only by considering what general idea the words symbolise that we can make a summary statement of the meaning of a poem which no part of the poem contradicts"; while the later ones, with their greater concern for the events than the processes of the world have a sense of 'occasion' which makes it easier to apply "the usual standard of appropriateness of language to meaning."

Although the final poems have been adversely criticized, the general view has been, like Maud's that the poems in Deaths and Entrances are superior in quality and interest to earlier ones; there has also been agreement as to the reasons for their superiority and so it is interesting to find a critic who agrees broadly with the distinctions drawn, but finds a steady loss of power from the first disciplined form of poems with their "noticeable effort to prolong and perpetuate
either one image or one single symbolic approach." The loss is said to occur when symbolism is more diffuse, repetitions less frequent and the sexual imagery decreased, and is associated with the poet's life in London:

"The Map of Love" was not spread out in a Welsh dawn. It was the product of London, of lionisation, of exposure to new and not-so-wonderful influences. The spiritual conflict, the passion which burned sustainedly in his earlier work, faded slowly as the walls of Wales fell. . . Intellectual cleverness, working with the old emotional symbols, brought only a slackening of power and tension. 'Man' had been the 'metaphor' of his cribbed night hours. In London, free, word-fondness remains to confuse, but it is his major concepts that are in fact confounded.

The childhood theme and atmosphere which is elsewhere thought to enhance the quality and significance of Thomas's vision, is here questioned; Mathias asks whether the childhood image was "the only one sweet and powerful enough to father and hold in family so many others, central enough in his feeling to recapture the dynamic of his first writing?" His conclusion is clear:

But Dylan the romantic poet was dead, perhaps, even before his early time. The tensions and terrors of existence had been talked out.

Is it you, Cymric, or I who am so cold? Was it a word and world America killed?

asked George Barker. If it was indeed a word only, others may come to think as I do, that Dylan's great work in body was his first, burned out in the cold, small hours in his father's house, when he sat between Death and Destiny. That was the time when poems were impelled out of him, when his great gifts were matched by an itch of thigh, or bone, or eye, a total compulsion within and against life.

In spite of its unusualness, the reasons for holding such a view are

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219 Roland Mathias, "A Merry Manshape (or Dylan Thomas at a Distance)," Dock Leaves, V (Spring 1954), 30.
insecurely based on biographical detail and a strange vision of the 'romantic' with a "total compulsion within and against life" (a description which, suggests if meaningful, an iconoclastic attitude foreign to the affirmative celebration of the processes of the world recognizable in most poems).

The dependence of this kind of criticism on an appeal to circumstances surrounding the poet and on a rhetoric which tends to invest the poetry as spuriously 'special' with its own atmosphere (as in "burned out in the cold, small hours in his father's house, when he sat between Death and Destiny") leads to a misleading emotionalism which disguises the nature of the poetry:

It must be for consolation that the last great Romantic poet was accorded an immediate recognition worthy of his stature. It is not in the world now to recreate his like, and the 'merry manshape' which he made out of a less happy but perhaps greater age must glimmer for us longer than our eyes, down-lidded, may dare this day acknowledge.

It is therefore a relief to encounter criticism the immediate concern of which is to find out what can be said about the poetry's value as evidenced by the poetry alone. An important value is seen in Thomas's keen sense of form, his poetry's "cunning pattern of ebb and flow, of movement and counter-movement." Daiches rejects the notion of Thomas as a mad rhetorician or a writer of texts for exposition, "neither a whirling romantic nor a metaphysical imagist," and regards him as a craftsman creating a "ritual of celebration," of the continuous process of life who in his early work seeks a ritualistic celebration of man's identities, of movement towards

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death from conception and of the "glory and wonder" of the unification of man and nature, the human and divine, life and death. He is regarded as later triumphantly realising that destruction in death means "perpetual life in a cosmic eternity," as in "A Refusal to Mourn":

It illustrates not only a characteristic theme of what might be called the middle Thomas, but also a characteristic way of handling the theme. The poem is ritualistic in tone; its dominant images are sacramental; and the cunningly contrived rise and fall of the cadence of each stanza adds to the note of formal ceremony . . . The paraphrasable meaning of the poem is simple enough: the poet is saying that never, until the end of the world and the final return of all things to their primal elements, will he distort the meaning of the child's death by mourning. One dies but once, and through that death becomes re-united with the timeless unity of things.

Daiches provides an example of moderate criticism which is based upon a judicious mixture of close analysis and broader critical appraisal of themes and techniques, which follows the poet's development and which is content to be selective. He outlines Thomas's development from congested poetry through 'occasional' poems like "A Refusal to Mourn" to "a period of more open-worked poetry in which, instead of endeavouring to leap outside time into a pantheistic cosmos beyond the dimensions he accepts time and change and uses memory as an elegiac device." He is right to stress that the divisions cannot be rigid and that poems occur which are different from the norm just as "A Winter's Tale" with its beautiful treatment of a folk theme and "Vision and Prayer" with its "theme of the identity of himself, everyman and Christ," are different. "Poem in October" is put forward as typical of the "more limpid, open-worked poems of the third period," a period in which Thomas is
said to show an acceptance of man as he is, in poetry which learned to be simple and honest. Daiches' final assessment is moderate and shows a sympathetic yet discriminating receptivity for the value of the poetry:

Was he a great poet? Against him it can be argued that his range was severely limited, that (in his earlier poems) he overdid a handful of images and phrases to the point almost of parodying himself, that many of his poems are clotted with an excess of parallel-seeking metaphors. I doubt if he wrote a dozen really first-rate poems . . . .

In his favour it can be claimed that at his best he is magnificent, as well as original in tone and technique, and that he was growing in poetic stature to the last. Perhaps the question is, in the most literal sense, academic. It is enough that he wrote some poems the world will not willingly let die.

Although his essay is not a detailed survey of the poetry, Daiches' evaluation is a sound basis upon which to rest Thomas's status; the recognition of the academic nature of the question of greatness supports the contention that can be made that Thomas's is a poetry which is more than usually dependent upon individual response to the effects created, and that its criticism frequently can only describe responses, expand upon the significance of images and discuss the value of the experience felt by one particular reader.

Where poetry is impressionistically concerned with the quality of basic experiences and makes little reference to any recognizable system, to any moral, social, religious or philosophical order, and where it so strongly appeals to an ineffable sense of the glory or wonder of life, criticism is limited to description of technical expertise, textual analysis, generalised views on the truthfulness and penetration of the poet's insight, and finally to individual attempts to capture and define the area of emotional response which
lies beyond description. In such circumstances there is an appealing simplicity and accuracy in Daiches' belief that "it is enough that he wrote some poems that the world will not willingly let die."

No comprehensive evaluation of the criticism that was published in the period of this survey is possible, since there are several clearly defined kinds of critical response, each of which has to be assessed separately; and, since the poetry is frequently divided into at least an early and a late period, if not into three periods, there is an observable shift in critical emphasis which also complicates the matter. The most distinctive type of criticism takes comparatively little account of the poet's development since it is based upon a submission of the critical faculty either to the persuasive emotionalism and sonority of the verse or to the apparent strength of its complexity. It is characterized by the dramatic gestures of Edith Sitwell and by the appeal to a concept of poetry as a perfectible abstraction to which the usual criteria of verbal discourse cannot apply, evident in Herbert Read's description of "absolute poetry" which is not to be reviewed but merely acclaimed. Since it is inescapable that a poem, being composed of words, makes statements (no matter how incoherent), poetry must ultimately be limited by the imperfections of the language it uses, and cannot be described as "pure" or "absolute". Purity refers to a perfect refinement of the nature of a substance, a state unattainable by man's thought as it is expressed in any form, and a quality beyond the resources of language: 'absolute poetry' is simply a meaningless phrase which makes possible a baseless type of criticism. The kind of attitude typified is the result of an emphasis on the poetry's appeal to the individual's
unique sensation on reading it which excludes any reference beyond that sensation to the general significance of the experience communicated; it permits any number of inflated claims to be made which are beyond criticism, and permits the 'appreciation' of the poetry to become a fashion, almost an affe ctation. It is a critical attitude related to the embarrassing interest in the more lurid details of the poet's life found in many biographical articles and epitomized by J. M. Brinnin's account of the American lecture tours.221 Neither the criticism nor the vulgar curiosity can be constructively discussed, and have to be ignored other than as curious or distasteful phenomena unrelated to the poetry's value.

Closely related to the Sitwellian approach is the way in which the poetry can be distorted and used to illustrate the eccentric notions of a crank, (as in the remarkable account of the 'Poetic Athlete'), or the fanciful theories of an otherwise sensible critic (as is later seen in Olson's astrological interpretation of the sonnet sequence). In all three areas, the Sitwell–Read approach, the personality cult, and the distortion of the poetry, the common factor is that the critic or observer asserts an importance greater than the poetry or the man; the importance is contained in the breathless amazement of the critic, the desire to acquire status from a presumed familiarity with the man, or the wish to substantiate a theory whose impulse is in the critic not the poetry. In effect, the fault is a failure to give the proper status to the reality and independence of the poetry in favour of an assertion of the personality of the critic which distracts from the rightful object of criticism.

The distasteful detail of the interest in Thomas's personal affairs is not relevant here, but it is probable that his capacity to perform a public act, to play to his audience is reflected in the dramatic tone of his writing, and in the tendency in the last few poems towards technical virtuosity beyond the needs of his themes. Just as biography has to be grounded in the facts of a man's life, so criticism must be better grounded in the actuality of the poetry, more concerned with what is there, even if, as will be argued, the poetry's achievement finally rests upon its unique effect on the reader; the very individuality of its appeal is a limitation of the poetry's general value, not a sign of its purity or absoluteness.

The inflation of a poet's reputation provokes adverse criticism, and where exaggerated claims of Thomas's greatness are founded on insubstantial and vague assertions, it is unsurprising that the opposition is vehement and extreme. The *Scrutiny* articles have been seen to make justifiable complaints against the development of a cult, but the vigour of their polemic makes their criticism unbalanced, and though they provide a necessary counter to inflated criticism, they are weakened by faults of rigidity and intolerance born of their polemical purpose. There is some confusion of aim, for the intention to destroy a cult of admirers conflicts with the attempt to reveal the defects of the poetry; the great energy required for the former purpose causes the criticism to be unnecessarily and unhelpfully destructive. There is apparently a lack of sympathy in the *Scrutiny* critics which derives from their demands for high standards of seriousness in literature which makes their criticism lack the flexibility required to accept the value of various grades of poetry.
At worst, such inflexibility causes the poetry to be dismissed in a sentence, without substantial discussion and as if no differentiation were required of one poem from another.

Where the Scrutiny critics were not sufficiently irresponsible to fail to substantiate their opinions, there were those whose instant condemnation of "pretentious nonsense" indicates a failure to adjust to the different responses demanded by the poems' manner of engaging the reader's attention. Failure to make clear the nature of a particular poetry and the methods by which it is expressed can lead, and with Thomas's poetry has led to the mistake of praising or condemning it for what it is not: the apple is condemned for not being a good orange, or is made out to be golden when it is quite ordinary. These two extreme responses to Thomas which are so evident throughout his career provide no lasting estimate of the poetry, but do emphasise the importance of criticism which firstly seeks to establish what it is confronted with: we have to know what kind of apple we have, before discussing its quality. The alternative is the sterile critical battle which is far removed from what matters:

The wild over praise of Thomas's original backers was answered by the savage onslaught of those who felt that the whole thing had gone too far, and by about 1946 one felt that the critics were quite simply talking to each other rather than the public and certainly not bothering overmuch about the poems.222

A third type of criticism which has been evident involves a variety of approaches, but has in common an obvious willingness to describe what the poetry is before assessing its significance. The

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222 John Wain, see above, footnote 172.
method of description varies from the closely detailed analysis of
the text demonstrated by such as Empson and Olson, to a wider per-
pective which describes predominant themes, emotional attitudes and
techniques through which it is possible to define the qualities of the
experience and vision of the poet. The chief advantage of an approach
which is firstly concerned with the nature of the poetry is that it is
more likely to avoid criticizing the verse for being a poor example of
something it never was. Careful study of the poetry will show not
only the experiences created, explored and defined, but also the
particular responses it elicits from the reader; without accurate
knowledge of what the poetry is 'aimed at,' it is not possible to
evaluate, for the critic will find himself making false demands such
as for a paraphrasable meaning, for the poem to 'say something' which
can be analysed, rather than to create the effect of whatever the
situation is in which the 'something' is found. Doubtless criticism
must eventually ask whether the method has achieved as notable a
poetic statement as one in which the poet applies himself to defining
the nature of the thing itself, the very principles of existence
rather than what it is like to exist, but initially it must confine
its enquiry to defining the qualities and deficiencies of the method
itself. Criticism must always be prepared to tolerate the poetic
method in order to see what it achieves, and only then should general
standards of artistic excellence be referred to.

It is misleading to apply prescriptive criticism to poetry as
volatile as this and which effects a radical change from the earlier
poems with their tautological image-making designed to capture as
many aspects of a narrow experience as possible, to the more outward-
looking poems of his later period which are directed towards an expanding suggestiveness of effect which encourages the reader to continue the creative process begun by the poem. Because he seeks to isolate and accept the essence of the poetic method before making any comparative evaluation, and because he captures and describes that essence so convincingly, Stephen Spender is prominent amongst the many commentators of the period. More than most he combines sympathy with a keen critical sense, and fulfills the primary function of the critic, which is not to impose judgments upon the reader, but to present him with the clearest possible understanding of the experience communicated and the skills employed in the communication and to suggest the significance of the achievement of the artist.

Thomas's method of taking a situation and creating the consciousness of being in that situation is a difficult one for the critic. If the poetry were the poeticising of a preconceived logical thought or a previously experienced and recollected situation it might be susceptible to criticism of the kind which evaluates the quality of thought and tests it against existing systems of logic and philosophy or against what are thought to be important areas of experience. But the only test of Thomas's poetry is the effectiveness of the composition in providing the reader with a vivid awareness of mood and the sharing of a sensuous experience. Assessment of the reader's participation in the creative process of reading a poem is the main function of criticism of Thomas, and this inevitably leads to a preponderance of analysis of technical skills which effect the impression on the reader's senses, an emphasis on the role of sound, rhythm and the sensuous potential of the imagery.
It is in the nature of reviewing that few articles present more than a limited account of a particular aspect of the poet's work, and the same is true of most of the longer essays published during the period under survey; but certain vital issues become evident from the collection of criticism, issues which are fundamental to understanding the phenomenon of Thomas's poetry, its popular acceptance and the eventual reluctance of most critics to find greatness in it. Few issues are more insistent or more typical of the critical concerns of the time than that of meaning. *Eighteen Poems* and *Twenty-five Poems* caused an immediate separation of those who expect a poem to 'say something' in a logical syntax with a readily paraphrasable meaning from those who accept that it may work in a more indirect way such that the reader understands it by an intuitive leap of recognition, reinforced by the repetition of key images expressive of a central experience. These early poems involved a creative dependence upon a series of images associated with simple observations from a bizarre perspective on elemental situations; the fecundity and frequent craziness of his imagery gives poems a violent and powerfully concentrated appearance, and a regularity of structure and metre imposes on them a certain formality. Yet the consequence is disappointingly light insignificance: the verbal activity does not define the experience that informs the poem but rather rearranges it several times in different images; it is no distillation of experience, nor even an ordering of it, but rather an undiscriminating collection of responses to some basic areas of largely adolescent experience.

Because the poems which correspond to such a description can only effect an excited response of a similarly undiscriminating nature, they
do not appeal to those whose idea of a poem is of a verbal record of a rationalised idea or an ordered and distilled experience. Even where the reader is prepared to allow the resonant sounds and the proliferation of images to invade his senses with an intuition beyond words, the very lack of order, of philosophic, moral or social principle inherent in the poet's observation and method, limits the significance of the poems to how far Thomas's obsessive preoccupations with a few areas of experience create a poetic world that impresses, and how far the reader is satisfied by the excitation of his senses and perception by the vigorous suggestiveness of images which are repetitively used in its creation. The main sources of the dissatisfaction which can be sensed in much of the criticism of these early poems include the obscurity caused by the nature of their conception and expression and, more importantly, the serious limitation of the aptness and significance of the poet's vision; where the reader, regardless of his willingness to be carried along with the flooding imagery, finds himself lost because of convoluted syntax, obscure grammatical relationships or a failure to ground images in common experience of the language, the poem inevitably fails; and where the communication succeeds, it may be thought that what is explored and expressed, no matter how fascinating, bizarre, horrifying or dazzlingly impressive, is not closely enough related to the reader's experience or interest for such effects to be other than temporary. The method is not to be dismissed because poems created by it are neither paraphrasable nor definitive in meaning, but where the experience itself does not persuade one of its importance, its highly-charged expression can only afford transient pleasure and cannot sustain a lasting
significance. Presented with such a situation, the critical reader who enjoys the early poetry is largely restricted to analysis of the techniques of expression, for it is from the quality of the expression that his enjoyment comes, hence the predominance of technical comment in the criticism of the first three books. It is also partly an implicit recognition of Thomas as a public performer, a concept which will be considered later.

The persistent restatement of his responses to elemental matters of birth, sex and death in series of images drawn from a few easily recognized sources has been seen to be a cause of dissatisfaction since it severely restricts the reader's participation in the activity of reading; if he is thus excluded from using images to create correspondences in his own mind, drawn from the impact of the poet's vision on his own related experience, hindered from developing an appreciation that goes beyond the actual significance of the poem, the poem has abrogated its proper function: instead of appreciating the experience shared, one is left, after the initial verbal excitement, with the experience observed, which is less satisfying because it is less moving. Thomas's development from the restrictive vision and practice of most of the early poems is generally attributed to a clarification of diction and imagery and a more developed sense of the 'occasion' which inspires and sustains a poem and seen, not so much as something completely new, but as a development of those few early poems in which these qualities can be found. Yet while it is true that the sense of occasion was vital in helping him better to objectify his imagery and to unify his poems with a more significant theme, it is not enough to say that his style became clearer in
certain ways without noting that it concerns a change in the relationship of reader to poem.

When the reader is limited to observing the experience of a poem, it is necessary for it to contain a more evident intellectual interest than Thomas ever offered; where one kind of poem engages the reader in a shared response to a situation created, another encourages him to observe the situation and grasp the significance of the poet's enquiry into the nature and meaning of the experience. The value and enjoyment of the former lies in the satisfaction of participating in an experiential activity which deeply appeals to an intuitive recognition of what is important in human life because of the poet's skill in evoking the response: the significance of such a poem, at best, expands infinitely in the reader's mind. In contrast, the latter kind of poem appeals to a speculative curiosity in the reader comparable to the enquiring interest of the poet into the principles of human existence, so that its value lies more in the strength of the intellectualisation of ideas, its enjoyment in recognizing philosophic truths made clear in the poetic situation.

For the reader to be absorbed into the creative activity of the former kind, the poetic method relies heavily on imagery that is suggestive of effects or refers obliquely to indeterminate and undefinable states of flux in man and the universe; it is a method exemplified by Thomas's early poems such as "Light breaks where no sun shines" with its appeal to an experience beyond logic:

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 eyes
And blood jumps in the sun;
Above the waste allotments the dawn halts.
To express the speculative concerns of the contrasting type of poem, the poet requires an imagery which accurately and transparently makes concrete the philosophic abstractions of his thought; such a method is most evident in the tough intellectual wit of the metaphysicals, in images startling in their concreteness although apt only as a pointer to the concept involved:

Let me powre forth
My tears before thy face, whilst I stay here,
For thy face coines them, and thy stampe they beare,
And by this Mintage they are something worth,
For thus they bee
Pregnant of thee.

(John Donne, "A Valediction: of Weeping.")

Where Thomas's early poems fail it is because they fall uncomfortably between these two types by using a method suited to drawing the reader into the world of the poetry but making poems so opaque that he is too often left out as a rather bewildered observer, and if he is thus forced to look in from outside the situation, and is denied the enjoyment of sharing its effects, he seeks the alternative satisfaction of intellectual stimulation only to find that Thomas does not have the philosophical interest or penetration to sustain an intellectual enquiry. The very method of his style of poetry which should draw the reader in, is so overloaded with effects that it denies him entry. Few poets have been able to effect a compromise; when Wordsworth combines philosophical enquiry with affective poetry, he succeeds where Thomas fails because of the depth of his social concern and because his style is so much more discursive. Thomas's style never allowed him both to create movingly the effect itself and to reflect upon its significance as Wordsworth's did,
because its expression is too excited and its structure too meticulously wrought to allow the comparatively leisurely pursuit of meaningfulness of Wordsworth's tranquil recollections.

There is therefore an uncertainty of purpose in the first three collections which helps explain the critics' puzzlement and their unease with regard to his technique, which was thought to be working vigorously to little apparent purpose. Because we are not emotionally committed to sharing the effects of the poet's vision and because the actuality of the vision is at least bewilderingly remote and at worst repulsive, the linguistic processes of the poems assume an undue importance - the impressiveness of the language is too easily treated as an end in itself, while the poem itself, that is, the total significance of what has been created, is largely ignored. Thus some reviews of Eighteen Poems, Twenty-five Poems, and The Map of Love lose sight of what finally should be the critic's concern, the nature and importance of what has been communicated, and consequently do not always succeed in convincing that what has been created has the stimulating power to enhance our appreciation of the areas of existence involved or to satisfy us that the effort of understanding has been justified by the value of what has been understood. It is only in a few poems from these volumes that Thomas succeeds in either presenting a situation which is itself worth contemplating and in such a manner that its significance impresses us as in "After the Funeral," or in creating an affective situation in such a way as to involve the reader in an actively creative response to which there is no limit.

The widening of the poet's concerns to involve subjects beyond
himself which culminates in the finest poems of *Deaths and Entrances* and which was noted by most critics, together with the increasing clarity of expression resulting from the unifying power of writing about a recognizable situation and occasion, act to resolve the uncertainty. Because there is more evidently an externalised subject to the poems, the poet is able to objectify his observation and description sufficiently to establish a readily apprehended context within which he can work towards making and sustaining the emotional tension which affects and includes the reader. The words of the poems become less exclusively involved in denoting the physical nature of a hideous world peopled by ghosts and functioning, it seems, in a slimy mess of granular secretions and more concerned with a simple denotation of situation whilst opening up a rich suggestiveness that makes impressive the effects experienced by the poet in contemplating that situation. How much the reader is thrilled by his part in the situation only partly depends upon the poet's skill; while the power of stimulus afforded by the poem is a function of the poet's ability as a craftsman and while the potential of a chosen situation to engage our deepest responses depends upon how closely it is related to the vital and universal concerns and passions of man, the final regard for Thomas's status must rest upon how much we value what any poem is (which can be the subject of critical discourse and agreement) and what we make of the emotional states it excites in us (which can only be a matter of appreciation).

In a less subtle way, the reader or listener's response to Thomas's poetry is a response to the strong element of public performance evident both in the composition itself and in the readings
which served to extend his reputation considerably. There is consistent reference throughout the criticism surveyed to that element in the poetry which reveals the showman in Thomas; whatever terms are used, bard, preacher, celebrator, drunken babbler, they point to the same feature and indirectly state the nature of the greatest critical difficulty Thomas presents to his audience. Just as the dramatist must ensure that his play evokes an immediate response, so Thomas seeks the instant reaction, but where the playwright has a variety of techniques through which he can vividly present the action, Thomas only has words, and where the playwright has a number of characters whose interactions create and resolve the tensions and conflicts of the dramatic situation, Thomas chooses to have only himself. Thus both the poet's experience and his medium are limited, although presented dramatically: the experience does not always have the universality to justify the histrionics and the expression often appears designed to resonate in the ear rather than be significant to the mind. The result is a display of verbal agility which may impress and which may be an effective communication of experience; the dissonance and uncertainty that characterize the criticism may derive from the critics' inability to come to terms with the dependence on that display. There is no doubt that the over-rating of Thomas's ability which is associated with the 'cult' is just as much a consequence of the poet as performer as the development of the 'legend' is a consequence of the man as performer.

At best, the poetry benefits by its singing quality and the radiance of its vision when the poet affirms the joyousness of the creation and fulfils his wish:
O may my heart's truth
Still be sung
On this high hill in a year's turning.

At worst there are the horrors of the early poems described in impossible terms at the pitch of the voice and in insistently monotonous rhythms, or the artificial excitement of a poem like "In Country Sleep" in which it appears necessary to season the lines with the spice of a series of exclamation marks:

Hill of cypresses! The din and tales in the skimmed Yard of the buttermilk rain on the pail! The sermon Of blood! The bird loud vein! The saga from mermen To seraphim Leaping! The gospel rooks! All tall, this night, of him Who comes as red as the fox and sly as the heeled wind.

The situation demands stringent selection of poems which put the dramatic utterance to significant effect by disciplining it to the statement being made and the critic's willingness to allow such dramatic virtuosity a proper place amongst the techniques of poetry and to admit the propriety of its attraction despite the simplicity of the experience created. Thomas was a poet who performed for his public, some of whom idolized him foolishly, some of whom ostracized him as if he were a rather vulgar music-hall artiste, but many of whom enjoyed and admired most, though not all of the act. The achievement is substantial though by no means great, for the elements of greatness include an intellectual penetration, philosophical discipline, and a moral toughness which were not his; the achievement of the criticism of his lifetime is severely limited, for once the eccentricities are removed, together with the idolatry and the calumny, there is only a scattering of sound articles which succeed in defining the poetry sensibly and in assessing its merits fairly
and constructively. Ultimately it is the sober voices of such as Stephen Spender, Edwin Muir, Cyril Connolly, David Daiches, Elder Olson and Ralph Maud which show that the public who appreciated the performance contained some notably level-headed and able men of letters whose appreciation is tempered by a fine discrimination and whose cautious judgements are most likely to be supported by posterity.
APPENDIX

The text of the reviews of *Eighteen Poems*,

and *Twenty-five Poems*. 
**Adelphi, IX (February 1935), 314.**

This (as much as anything else) is the Age of Laryngitis. On the concert platform, a singer is more commended for subtle interpretation of the pseudo-songs of Hugo Wolf (which is not essentially a vocal act) than for brazening the whole of his body to Handel or Rossini (which is). On the stage, mouthing and ranting (which was at least physically satisfying) has given place to an apologetic kind of histrionic impressionism (even with Shakespeare: who wrote to be ranted). And half the technical effort of poets today is to stifle that very rhythmic urge - the urge to stand up and sing - which is the primary motive force of all poetry.

It is not that we are all castrati, singing in unnatural voices: we do not sing at all, do not open our throats at all, cultivate no resonance at all, in the mask, but make dull gutteral sounds and click our tongues. And this is accepted as proper by poets and their managers: young poets gape at you if you talk of sonority. There is the other side of the question, of course: the Joycean side, on which people are occupied exclusively in vocal antics. But what is an exception only to prove the rule (or to be a dialectical antithesis).

And why this state of things? I don't know. I know only that my strongest critical conviction declares poetry primarily to be voice-production (I first lurched into the critical lists with an article on Loss of Voice), and nearly all poetry is bad today because poets are either too unsociable or too weak-kneed to get up on their hind legs and perform, and I recognise in Dylan Thomas a poet so free from embarrassment, sore throat, sulks and stutters, that I must formally declare that '18 Poems' is the most hopeful thing in English poetry since Robert Graves's last volume, and that I find this fact relevant and significant: Thomas comes from one of the two regions of the British Isles (the other's mine) which produces singers and have still a powerful music tradition.

Which is all very personal and extravagant and temperament and not quite critical style. But who the hell cares? New good poets are not so common that you can just sit about and make polite noises when they appear. And Dylan Thomas is both new and good (or will be, if etc.)

In the first place his use of language is Shakespearean, which nobody's has been since Milton, except Keats's, Hopkins' (v Dr. Leavis) and, more recently, Graves's.

For we shall be a shouter like the cock,  
Blowing the old dead back...

Thomas is not always as directly Shakespearean as that; but there is always (when the verse keeps at its own best level) the same verbal exuberance, rich precision, rollick, refusal to apologise for what he is saying, and it all fits that grand organ, the human
throat, like a Handel aria. But what (you say) about the rest? Throat and ear are not all. The other senses want equal satisfaction.

And that's true enough. But I can't set about writing up Thomas's eyes, nose, palate and fingertips at the same length now. And there's more than the five senses anyway: the cerebrum, the spinal cord and the solar plexus. There's this:

The fellow half was frozen as it bubbled
Corrosive spring out of the iceberg's crop,
The fellow seed and shadow as it babbled
The swing of milk was tufted in the papa,
For half of love was planted in the lost,
And the unplanted ghost.

And this comes, like a good deal of '18 Poems' from the stomach: which is (whether you approve of Lawrence and stomachy writers in general, or not) a mighty fine place.

Faults? Plenty ...... some lushness, clash and confusion of images, straining to make words do more than words can, constriction — that is, concentration of energies within the scope of the individual stanza, instead of sustained movements. But these phenomena all come from the virtue of an over fertile imagination: unless Thomas becomes a respectable literary gent, a professional outlaw, or a critics' pet (and he probably will: a pox on critics!) they won't prevent, etc., etc. You ought to read this book.

Rayner Heppenstal.

Time and Tide, February 9, 1835, p.204.

A verse-critic may review 500 books in a decade. He will be fortunate if, in the same period, he discovers ten considerable poets ... Mr. Auden is already a landmark. His own poetry stands clear above fashion. But the Audenesque convention is nearly ended; and I credit Dylan Thomas with being the first considerable poet to break through the fashionable limitation and speak an unborrowed language, without excluding anything that has preceded him. Barker and others have promised this, but Dylan Thomas goes much further towards realization. For a first book this is remarkably mature.

Thomas's poetry is personal or universal, but not social. He is thereby purer than the fashionable. He is a grateful heir to Eliot's magical sense of the macabre and to Auden's textual firmness, but by inheritance rather than by imitation. A full digestive stage
intervenes. His most personal attribute is a piston-like energy that jolts and shocks in short groups of hard, contrasted consonants:

If I were tickled by the rub of love... [whole stanza quoted.]

In reading these poems the widely varied lip-movements of the reader reveal the violent energy of the idiom. Airmen and pylons are no longer stewed to a smooth fluency. The words are solid as stone, slabbed side by side and forced up to separate vividness by a fiery and intense eloquence.

Appreciation of new poetry cannot be adequately rationalised until we have lived with it for a time. It is at first a matter of excited recognition. Mr. Thomas's poems are not easily swallowed, but their quality proclaims itself at a touch. He is at present obsessed with the vocabulary of physiology in its more sinister aspect, and he is apt to read certain block phrases of a private code of thought. These are minor faults, however and they vanish in the achievement of fusing metaphysical poetry into sensuous terms. None of his contemporaries has such central clarity of thought as a poetic experience. This is not merely a book of unusual promise; it is more probably the sort of bomb that bursts not more than once in three years.

Desmond Hawkins.

The Morning Post, January 1, 1935.

A NEW POET

There is no doubt an art-for art's sake tendency (though no more than a tendency) in the poems of Mr. T. S. Eliot and Mr. Ezra Pound. In reaction to this among the newer poets, there is a tendency (and more than a tendency) to make verse pragmatic, utilitarian, moralistic and political; to posit an "England of ours where no one is well", and then to write poems which will make everyone, if only they will read the poems, as well as possible.

To blame for this are Mr. Auden's imitators rather than Mr. Auden himself, who stands out as the one new poet of the last ten years with indisputable individuality, power of imagination and technical skill. He is too good a poet to do himself what his poems encourage other writers to do. Mr. Louis MacNeice is one new poet outside the moralistic political caravan, and Mr. Dylan Thomas is another. These 'Eighteen Poems' are Mr. Thomas's first book, and at once they are distinguished by being "post-revolutionary", post-, pre-, or extra-political. They are concerned with what is more important than the next borough council or general election or the next revolution, with
birth, death, and life and the human spirit. They are close, constricted, dark poems, individual but not private; and often they are confident and vigorous in imagination:

When like a running grave, time tracks us down,
such lines as this or,

The crutch that marrow taps upon their sleep,

frequently occur, with bold images occasionally expanded, as in Poem Six,

My hero bares my side and sees his heart
Tread, like a naked Venus,
The beach of flesh, and wind her bloodred plait.

Hear the end of Poem Five, one of the most complete, with a better formal coherence than most of the others:

The hand that whirls the water in the pool
Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind
Hauls my shroud sail.
And I am dumb to tell the hanging man
How of my clay is made the hangman's lime.

There is much that is faulty in these poems, technically and in content. A psychologist would observe Mr. Thomas's constant use of images and epithets which are secretory or glandular. Feather, hair, skin, marrow, gums, lips, milk, sucking, blood, veins, pitch - such words occur in every poem, reminding one of Hopkins's words of juice and of metal that can be forged. Some of the central Mr. Thomas is undoubtedly in these words, but the intellective Mr. Thomas needs to control them with the greatest care. They give these poems a monotony, which combines with a rhythmical monotony, for he has a trick of ending far too many lines with a paeon, three unstressed and a stressed syllable, preceded by feet of slack and stress (e.g. the first line quoted from Poem Five, or "Had stringed my flask of matter to his rib"). Occasionally effective, this with iambic and anapaests greatly disturbs the reader asked to read 18 poems. If it is not impertinent to suggest it, Mr. Thomas might learn much from Hopkins's rhythmical practice, and his admirable writings on sprung as opposed to the common regular metre.

Some of Mr. Thomas's images come from virtuosity with words rather than imagination, sometimes he permits obscurities which are too difficult for the most inquisitive torch; but if other things could be said both in praise and fault-finding, this is a first book worth reading, in which something good and not easily exhaustible has been done.
Kr. Thomas's idiom is certainly his own, even if it is often too "private" to be easily intelligible. But those who can only credit poetry with originality if it is also something of a puzzle will find much in this volume to gratify their taste for the elusive and disconcerting, as such lines as those following will suggest:

My fuses times to charge his heart  
He blew like powders 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.

Actually, the peculiar language in which these poems are written is easier to decipher than it at first appears, and Mr. Thomas's habit of translating human experience into the terms of physiology or of the machine, and his vivid sense of the correspondence between the forces informing the macrocosm and the microcosm result in some powerful as well as surprising imaginative audacities.

The hand that whirls the water in the pool  
Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind  
Hauls my shroud sail.  
And I am dumb to tell the hanging man  
How of my clay is made the hangman's lime.

The lips of time leech to the fountain head;  
Love drips and gathers, but the fallen flood  
Shall calm her sores.  
And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind  
How time has ticked a heaven round the stars.

And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb  
How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.

The Listener, February 27, 1935, p.361.

The first thing that strikes one about Mr. Dylan Thomas's poetry is its purely poetic force: there is nothing in it that could be taken for prose: his thought seems to transmute itself naturally and continuously into imagery. The second is the limitation of his poems to themes unpleasant or disgusting. The essential principle of his poetry is delight, but the delight is bound to disgust in a very close and tenacious way. Such combinations were common in Elizabethan and Jacobean poetry: one has only to think of Webster
and Donne. But an imagination that deals with such blind processes as the workings of lust and dissolution (which obsessed Webster and Donne, and Mr. Thomas as well) must be detached and philosophical if it is to be poetical; for only a philosophical contemplation of such things can give them meaning. When Mr. Thomas's mind is detached sufficiently it can produce the most strange and sometimes beautiful images, as when he sees

The summer children in their mothers . . .
Divide the day and night with fairy thumbs.

When it is not detached it sometimes creates a fine and striking image and as this:

My hero bares my side and sees his heart
Tread, like a naked Venus,
The beach of flesh, and wind her blood-red plait,

in which delight and disgust are inextricably entangled, and the poet's mind is not free. Mr. Thomas's questioning of life is essentially philosophical in the sense that it is a questioning of life's beginning and end. But the form which it takes, that is pre-natal and post-mortem imagery, is by its nature inarticulate, and so his meditations on these things sometimes deepen the horror which one naturally feels for them without achieving the clearness and objectivity of Webster's and Donne's. There is no doubt, nevertheless, that Mr. Thomas is a poet of very unusual endowment; the sensuous beauty of his images and the boldness of his use of language prove that. His sense of form is extraordinarily sure for such a young poet. His mastery of invention is not, though it is generally best when it is most daring. But there can be no doubt that this is one of the most remarkable volumes of poetry that have appeared during the last few years.

European Quarterly, I (February 1935), 274.

This is a book which calls for far more particular and extensive notice than it can be given here. Mr. Dylan Thomas's most salient quality in this first volume is an almost confusing abundance and inventiveness of imagery which seems spontaneously to give concrete and beautiful form to his thoughts; one of the surest signs of true poetic genius. The occasional immaturity of these poems is not an immaturity of form or expression but rather of experience. Mr. Thomas's purely poetic powers never fail him and they are continuously exercised; there is nothing that could be mistaken for mere prose in the book. The sensuous beauty of his poetry will strike the reader most at first, that quality being so rare in poetry at present; but
if he returns to it he will find also the most curious thought. This union of qualities should be found in all poetry, which should give such pleasure that we return to it again and again, and have such meaning that every reading has a new reward. The poems in this volume give this double pleasure. It is one of the most remarkable books of poetry which has appeared for several years.


Significance of Dylan Thomas's "18 Poems"

"A Poetical Cinquevalli Who Juggles Breathlessly Into The Eternal"

Reviewed by A. Spencer Vaughan Thomas, B.A. (Oxon)

Dylan Thomas's "18 Poems" is a volume that will cause endless commotion in poetical circles. To men and women nursed on Victorian tradition in poetry his verse will appear confusing and even absurd. But the New Poetry has its strong advocates. The volume is here reviewed by a young man of the poet's own generation, himself a poet and a close student of modern literature. Mr. Spencer Vaughan-Thomas belongs to a family held in reverence in Wales. He is English master at Barnet Grammar School.

A young Swansea poet has just published his first volume. In a town engrossed by Royal visits, civic centres, and sewage schemes, such an event might seem unimportant, but one glance at Mr. Dylan Thomas's new volume, "18 Poems" (Parton Bookshop 3/6), is enough to show that here is no ordinary rhymester content to twitter idly the praises of local beauty spots.

Mr. Dylan Thomas is in the forefront of the modern movement, outstripping Auden in audacity and Eliot in obscurity. He is an old Grammar School boy, now living in London, and his work is gaining a widening circle of readers, in the "Listener", "New Verse" and "The Criterion." He has definitely arrived. His fellow citizens will therefore turn to his book with unusual curiosity. They will not be disappointed. It is like no poetry that ever came out of Swansea before. Strange, compressed, tortuous, exciting by its wild leaps of imagination, and tantalizing by its equally strange lapses into
baffling obscurity, it will puzzle, irritate, and yet, we venture to say, grip the interest of the reader as few modern poets do.

Mr. Thomas has himself declared that "no poet ever understood everything he wrote," (vide "Chin Wags de Luxo"), and he is therefore in a position to appreciate the difficulties of his readers. There are phrases in his work calculated to disturb the intelligence of a Torquemada, but we have the assurance of the poet that these need not destroy our appreciation.

HIS POETICAL CREDO

Mr. I. A. Richards, the Cambridge critic, once wrote: "When views which seem to conflict with our own prepossessions are set before us, the impulse to refute them, rather than investigate them, is all but overwhelming"; and the only just approach to Mr. Thomas is to rid our minds of any moral, poetical or political prejudices, and accord to him, as one of the newer poets, the detached judgment of the newer criticism.

In a poetical credo, published in "New Verse" last year, he declares that he has been profoundly influenced by Jung and Freud, and the range of his vocabulary indicates this clearly. It is apparent, too, in the sources of his inspiration. Mr. Thomas is a poetical Cinquevalli, who juggles the problem of both life, death, and the place of the individual, and brings to them the attitude of his generation.

HIS TECHNIQUE

His technique may be of greater interest to those irrevocably removed from him by time and the moulding of another age. His work is highly concentrated, compressed, and mystical. At times his images jostle one another for elbow-room. Yet they often have force and vitality. He has, moreover, the ability to express a world of ideas in a few lines, and moves us from Heaven to Hell by a noun and its adjective. The following four lines are indicative of one attitude, compactly expressed:

"An old man's shank, one narrowed with my bone
And all the herrings swelling in the sea,
I sit and watch the worm beneath my nail
Wearing the quick away."

Like many other modern poets, he has derived some of his technique from Wilfred Owen and Gerard Manley Hopkins; but his ear is more sensitive to the pattern of sound than the ears of many other moderns.

INTERNAL ASSONANCE

The sound of words is part of Mr. Thomas's theory of poetry. His work is full of internal assonance; is loaded heavily with alliteration and the vowel changes within the line bewildering in their
dexterity. The following lines exemplify not only his technique, but the modern source of his imagery:

"Joy is no knocking nation, sir and madam
The cancer's fusion, or the summer feather
Lit on the cudded tree, the cross of fever
No city tar and subway bored to foster
Man through macadam.

This preoccupation with the devices of poetry produces in his work, for all its postulated modernity a certain archaic trait, comparable with the gorphwysfa of Welsh cynhanedi. The danger, too is the same. The rules are so strict, that often the original inspiration becomes lifeless in a straigh-jacket of technique. Mr. Thomas does not escape a certain monotony of style and rhythm.

Yet no one can read his work without feeling that here is a poet magnificently equipped to achieve great things. He has individuality, and a confident touch. His imagination is bold, so bold that, at times, like the young man on the flying trapeze, he flies through the air with the greatest of ease. We tremble for his safety, and wonder whether he will ever come to earth again.

A new poet is gone out from our midst to startle the literary circles of the town, with a ticket of Sur-realism from Paris, via Swansea. Mr. Thomas is to be watched closely (in more senses than one), because he has it in him to become something more than a wild-eyed Celt, a mere playboy of the West-end whirl.


'Eighteen Poems' by Dylan Thomas

Much competent poetry is being produced some of it of a very high standard; occasionally a volume of poetry is published which not only reaches this high standard but over-tops it. Such a volume is Dylan Thomas's "Eighteen Poems." Readers of the "Swansea Guardian" will remember some of Mr. Thomas's vituperative prose which appeared in these columns last summer.

Modern poets fall into two categories, those who are the creatures of their age, and those who are its creators. In the latter group we find Auden, Spender and Dylan Thomas. It is a fault of both Auden and Spender, that having perfected their techniques as poets, they strain themselves to become perfect media for propaganda. Their poetry suffers in consequence. Dylan
Thomas is too much the artist to allow politics to bemuse his muse. One knows instinctively his politics are correct, but they hover like a faint perfume above the lines of his poetry; they neither intrude or obtrude:

"My world is cypress and an English valley,
I place my flesh that rattles on the yards,
Red in an Austrian volley,
I hear through dead men's drums, the
Riddled lads,
Strewing their bowels from a hill of bones,
Cry Eloi to the guns."

Here in six lines of poetry is achieved all that Stephen Spender attempted in his long poem "Vienna."

Objection has been raised by ever so-called critics, that Mr. Thomas brings forbidden subjects within the ambit of his imagery. These critics at the same time hang festoons of ball bearings round the necks of poets whose artistic merit rests solely in setting a catalogue of engineering tools to verse.

**MACHINE AGE**

We live in an age of the machine. Many of our poets have been conquered by it, and with a view to propitiating its mercilessness, write rhapsodies to its beneficence and beauty. Some few pretend to ignore its existence and still wallow with Wordsworth amongst the pale pansies and modest marigolds. Not so Dylan Thomas; he has viewed the machine, assessed its strength and measured its significance. Like the operative at the switchboard controlling the city's power, he understands and controls it.

"And what's the rule? Death's feather on the nerve?
Your mouth, my love, the thistle in the kiss?
My Jack of Christ born thorny on the trees?
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."

And again:

"This is the world; the lying likeness of
Our strips of stuff that tatter as we move
Loving and being loth;
The dream that kicks the buried from their sack,
And lets their trash be honoured as the quick.
This is the world. Have faith."

"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."
The influence of surrealism is unmistakable on these poems, yet it is surrealism with a difference. Mr. Thomas is doing with poetry much the same as James Joyce did with prose. He is making a new language, not as Joyce did by making numerous languages to produce an illegitimate literary offspring, but hammering new meaning into old words and phrases; crowning his hacks with the alchemy of his essentially poetic imagination.

"20TH CENTURY." (A. E. Trick)

The Criterion, XIV (April 1935), 496.

Mr. Dylan Thomas is the most striking of the new poets who have appeared in the last twelve months; he has unravelled some of the relations of a new group of images, and he can stamp a traditional metre with an honest contemporary accent. He is consciously exploiting the subconscious; he sees that the psychological patterns underlying the sequence of images which come into our minds when we are not engaged in conscious thought give those sequences a unity and impressiveness of their own. Underlying patterns of that kind can often be found in poetry; though the poet and the reader may not always be conscious of them; the poetic effect is often greatest when the latent content is not consciously recognised. Here, perhaps, the present weakness of the poems of Mr. Thomas lies; he is concerned directly with the dark skeleton of the unconscious behind the face of poetry; the latent content is often identical with the explicit content; it is not, in fact, latent at all, and consequently some of the poems appear to be too consciously arranged. Mr. Thomas has found what he set out to find; the poem has not found and surprised the poet. The poems, like some Russian films and sham Surrealist poetry, are too "voouu"; the reader sees through them, and agrees that according to psychoanalytic theory the images are in order, but is disappointed not to find in the poem a revelation of something which may well be in his own mind, but which he could not himself bring to light, and he is not imaginatively convinced as he is, shall we say, by some of the recent poems of Robert Graves. The poem is a deduction from psychology, not a psychological discovery.

Again, some of the symbols which occur most frequently in these '18 Poems' appear at first, to be private symbols, which though comprehensible, are not necessarily valid for the reader. Perhaps Mr. Thomas's mind is more addicted than most to word-inversion; thus the references to "Death's feathers" become clearer, but not necessarily more evocative, if we associate the word 'wreathe' with 'feather.' Sometimes this first-order remoteness of the image from one more usual seems to serve the purpose of explicit content: the method is interesting but it lacks the effectiveness of a fully-
ordered 'explicit meaning' in which the whole of the explicit meaning is a symbol of the latent content.

But the technical interest, and the present monotony of Mr. Thomas's work must not blind us to the fact that the poems are good, some of them very good indeed. His interest in poetic technique, in words and in those subjective experiences which can only be expressed through images of tactile, kinaesthetic, and visceral sensation already produces good poems. The use of religious symbols in some of his poems seems to show that he realises that 'religious' poetry is psychological poetry which uses a symbolising much more effective and profound than his own limited and self-conscious Freudian images.

Michael Roberts

New Verse, XIII (February 1935), 21.

Certain things at present stand between Mr. Dylan Thomas and the poems which he may be able to write. First, two kinds of monotony, more apparent in eighteen poems one after another than in separate poems as they have appeared in New Verse. Second, an impurity of image; third, an awkwardness of syntax, and so a darkness of meaning, which resolves itself sometimes into no meaning: the poems in these places are caulked with Mr. Dylan Thomas's special kind of pitch and oakum. The monotonies are (i) rhythmical, and formal (to some extent); (ii) thematic, verbal, and imaginative. Mr. Thomas, for example, has found one line of an effective pattern:

"Where no sea runs, the waters of the heart"
"Nor fenced, nor staked, the gushers of the sky"
"Like some pitch moon, the limit of the globes"
"The film of spring is hanging from the lids"
"On tips of thought where thoughts smell in the rain"

He has fallen in love with it and he uses it with small changes again and again. These five samples come from one poem of thirty lines. Lines of a certain strength and pattern or similar strength and pattern can only be formed into similar wholes; and though the shapes of these eighteen poems vary, the variation is mainly visual; the "birth, copulation, death" thought of the poems persists through a similar vocabulary, and images repeated too often, and too often impure, i.e. instead of being imaginative or coming controlled from the momentary emotions, they are images of secretion, and glandular images (hair, feather, nail, milk, suck, worm, etc., etc.) which seem to emerge uncontrolled from the lower nature; and the poems have therefore a certain thickness, or opacity, in their often admirable rhetoric, which combines with the awkwardness of attempting
to compel words into strict form without the full skill which is required. At times any word will do: caulk it in, if it's a nice word, and damn the meaning.

The subtraction sum to find the merits of these poems and what they point towards is not difficult: take away what is bad and the good remnants are these: a rhetorical toughness, the now rare intellectual virtue of an attempt at form, occasional but not infrequent excellencies of imaginative statement and expression of realities beyond reality. Through these things Mr. Thomas (who was born in 1914) may come to poems far better than any in this first book. He needs severity from himself; but he has more inside him and a more sceptical intelligence and writes more genuine prose (not to include poems) than most new poets.

The Spectator, CLIV (April 26, 1935), 704.

NEW VERSE

Selected Poems: Marianne Moore.
Poems for F: Eduard Roditi.
Branwen: Idrwyn Griffith.
Poems: George Barker.
Eighteen Poems: Dylan Thomas.

Miss Marianne Moore is a writer less known in this country than many other American poets with smaller claims on our attention. A single volume, in 1921, is all that has been previously published here, and those of us to whom her name is not entirely new are probably familiar with it only through the pages of The Dial, or, more recently, of Mr. Pound's Active Anthology. In that collection, it seemed to me, Miss Moore stood out as the single contributor of importance whose reputation was not already recognised on either side of the Atlantic. And this impression is continued by the present volume of Selected Poems, which comprises all that Miss Moore is willing to have published, or re-published, of her work up to the present time. Whatever else one may think about Miss Moore's poetry, its genuineness is not to be questioned; and few reviewers will dispute Mr. Eliot's contention that genuineness, as distinct from greatness, is a duality that may sometimes be recognised during a writer's lifetime. Mr. Eliot himself, in his Introduction, is ready to go considerably further in praise of Miss Moore. He speaks of her as one of the few who have performed some service to the English tongue "by carrying on that struggle for the maintenance of a living language, for the maintenance of its strength, its subtlety, for the preservation of quality of feeling, which must be kept up in every generation." Those who take
the trouble to read Miss Moore's poems with attention will surely agree. For the bane of so much contemporary poetry in its diffuse-
ness, its lack of identification between feeling and expression, either through too vague and indeterminate, or, in an effort to
avoid the commonplace, too self-conscious and eccentric a use of
language. Whereas Miss Moore uses English precisely, with a terse
austerity which is the first step towards poetic intensity. And if
the majority of readers (of whom I must count myself one) find that
their chief pleasure in Miss Moore's work springs from her exact and
searching eye, her intricate pattern of observation, rather than
through any profound revelation of an internal truth, they will still
find her one of the few contemporary writers with a sensibility
keen enough and a technique accomplished enough to justify the
pleasurable effect of continued reading.

The same cannot be said, I think, of any other of the five
poets whose works are here reviewed. Certainly not Mr. Roditi,
whose poems, for all their bi-chromatic dress and lack of capitals,
enshrine the most commonplace of sentiments pretentiously expressed.
Nor yet, I should have said, of Mr. ll Wyn Griffith, whose narrative
poem Branwen has received the approbation of Mr. Michael Roberts and
Mr. Herbert Read. Mr. Griffith chooses a difficult theme, - the
invocation of the spirit of a legendary Celtic queen, whose counsel is
sought by the poet on behalf of his country Wales. The result is a
respectable but curiously ineffective piece of academic verse in which
the discrepancy between contemporary modes of experience and those
traditionally associated with romantic legend is continually in the
reader's way:

"Quietly, quietly. There are armed men
crossing the rim against the sky
and I know them not. Their spears are bright
there are silks, a maid walks like Spring
upon the meadowland."

No, this is altogether or too loose and unfelt: a worthy piece of
versification, but not poetry.

There remain Mr. Barker and Mr. Dylan Thomas, two more young
poets now published in book form for the first time, though known, like
Mr. Griffith, to readers of contemporary verse through recent
anthologies and the pages of the weekly reviews. Both are what I
would call "difficult" poets, in the sense that the 'point d'appui,'
the emotional objective of their poetry, is a little hard to grasp.
In Mr. Barker this has nothing to do with obscurity, either of
language or syntax; it is a question of the directions or indirections
with which the poet communicates his experience. Mr. Barker, though
linguistically simple, is at times so indirect that all trace of an
emotional experience is lost in the intricate maze of his obliquities.
Yet when the communication is direct and unsatisfactory "thinness"
sometimes appears, which makes one a little suspicious of so much
peripheral elaboration. Time alone will show how far this is
justifiable experimentation, but a poet who can write anything as good
as 'The Amazons' or 'The Web of Action', should not let lines like:

"A creation isolate
Through the corrosive breath
Of death; prohibiting the

Collision of internecine states
As two elements conflagrate
And in ashes, we emulate."

dispass into print.

Mr. Dylan Thomas is another sort of poet altogether. In exact contrast to Mr. Barker who is elaborate and oblique in intention though relatively simple in language, Mr. Thomas uses a complex and exotic vocabulary for the direct communication of simple, uncomplicated modes of feeling. So that where he is "difficult" it is a purely verbal difficulty – a matter of finding any precise interpretation for the favourite images, the high-keyed epithets which characterise his verse. Indeed, Mr. Thomas's danger, or so it seems to me, is that he is interested in the sound-pattern of words to the exclusion of other, and equally important values. Thus, for all its sonorisms, his poetry is always a little overloaded, a shade bombastic. This is generally an early fault, and easy to cure. Certainly Mr. Thomas has something in him, a spirited vertebrateness which is invigorating, and a technical assurance which may yet develop into a true authoritative-ness of manner. Much modern verse by older poets lacks the accomplishment of:

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.

But Mr. Thomas must cultivate a tougher, sparer use of language, must make himself more of an ascetic in words, or the austerity which his poetry so much needs will be lost in a Swinburnian facility.

I. M. Parsons.


DYLAN THOMAS

Recently a book of poems by Dylan Thomas was published ("16 Poems," Parton Press 3/6). It is the work of a man who uses the full force of original arrangement of words to blast away superficialities and
get at universal truths. He did not try to do it with the old blunted tool of conventional phrasing: it is too big a task: he turned instead, quite legitimately, to the full use of all the verbal weapons which the armoury of the English language provides, utilising the values of both sound and sense. For that reason he has been labelled "obscure" by some critics, in the sense that T. S. Eliot is obscure; whereas, in fact, T. S. Eliot used a definitely obscure method of literary-telegraphic symbols, requiring to the store of literature whence his images came, while Dylan Thomas plays directly on brain and heart with the tuning-fork of his well-chosen English.

WHAT IS POETRY?

Objectors to the modern method of poetic expression such as used by Dylan Thomas should go back to their literary A.B.C. and remember the difference between journalism - the narration of superficial facts - and conscious literary effort which strives to deal with cosmic and elemental matters. Poetry, however pretty in wording and metre, which deals in superficialities is merely rhyming journalism; real poetry is the expression of things which can be expressed only in poetry.

The charge that must be brought against a mass of the poetry of to-day is either that, for the sake of a specious tradition, it seeks to express the vitals of man and his universe in pretty-pretty Sunday afternoon jingle, or that it uses an obscure and modernist form as the key to unlock nothing but superficialities.

METRICAL MODERNISM

Dylan Thomas, in adopting a modernist form, did not consciously set out to riddle conventional hypocrisies. He wanted to express himself fully, and he found it was impossible in conventional form in which every phrase is hackneyed with lush materialism and stinking with the stale scented sweat of old Sunday afternoon parlours.

But on the other hand he was too conscious of the value of metrical form to abandon it and utilise the clashing breaks of prose passages which so many modern poets, in pale imitation of Eliot, introduce into their poetry. So within metrical form he set out to use, freshly, freely, and without restraint, the words of the English language.

THE METHOD

You may read a poem by Dylan Thomas in which not one of the separate verses conveys to you a whole meaning. But each verse touches on your sub-conscious store of impressions in such a way as to lead on to the main message which it is the poet's purpose
to convey. It is no more kicking of tinny phrases along a literary gutter, but a scientific method of making poetry do the work it is capable of doing - stirring up the godhead in man (conventional poetry only succeeds in stirring up materialistic excreta, or at best a vague hysteria). Dylan's method is to get hold of one of the violin strings of a man's inward being and twang it till it hurts. And when that happens, you are conscious that the string is made of the same stuff as the earth, space, Jesus Christ, and the stars and Mrs. Jones round the corner. This poetry plays on the universe.

ITS SIGNIFICANCE

It would not be possible by the older methods. For instance, Tennyson, dawdling with Maud in the garden, acted as a beautiful dose of salts for one's sentimental bowels, but you can get a much greater thrill by standing on a hillside on a starry night. The great Milton, ranging in the groves of Paradise, only wrote their by-laws in a lofty poetic version of the Road Traffic Act. These were great men in their sphere, Dylan Thomas may not reach the same standard in his; but whereas they played with the things which advertising slogan writers and street corner soul savers play with to-day, Dylan Thomas, whatever his success is reaching out toward central truths.

NEW PROSE MEDIUM

I have dealt with the poetry of Dylan Thomas as representative of all his work. In the short story he uses a semi-poetic medium, but he has not the same free play of words, and has to rely more closely on the symbolic nature of the events he pictures to get his meaning across. For this reason, his prose bears largely the quality of fantasy. It hovers, like his poetry, always on the edge of sublimities, keeping its face to the light. Through the eyes of his characters - who are almost invariably abnormal, and therefore strange to readers who are perpetually regaled with the adventures of sub-normal talking machines - we see glimpses of a world which my Lord Rhenosceous of the Fashionable Novel would mistake for the delirium tremens.

Dylan Thomas has commenced a sort of saga of the Jarvis Hills, into which he has painted the scenic background of his native Wales. But his characters are not typical of any race or time; they are dream people who tread the frontiers of space and eternity, whose eyes catch a glimpse of flaming reality ... and we, dazzled by the flash, come back to the mound of footfalls in a man-made street.

John Jennings.
... Mr. Dylan Thomas, the next poet on my list, is, I believe, twenty one years of age. He has very great gifts, though they are not as yet completely resolved. He is, at moments, a prey to his subconscious self, and consequently to obscurity: but from that subconscious self rise, time after time, lines which are transmuted by his conscious self into really great poetry, whose truth has been lived with most profound intensity, until it could be fused, concentrated into this strange greatness.

Let us take three verses from a poem which appeared in the October number of 'Programme', and we shall see Mr. Thomas at his best, and we shall see, too, the dangers by which he is beset.

A grief ago,
She who was who I hold, the fats and flower,
Or, water-lammed, from the scythe-sided thorn,
Hell, wind and sea,
A stem cementing, wrestled up the tower,
Rose maid and male,
Or, masted venus, through the paddler's bowl
Sailed up the sun;

And she who lies,
Like exodus a chapter from the garden,
Brand of the lily's anger on her ring,
Tugged through the days
Her rope of heritage, the wars of pardon,
On field and sand
The twelve triangles of the cherub wind
Engraving going.

Who then is she,
She holding me? The people's sea drives on her,
Drives out the father from the cassared camp;
The dens of shape
Shape all her whelps with the long voice of water,
That she I have,
The country-handed grave boxed into love,
Rise before dark.

CP, pp. 54-55, stanzas, 1 3 and 4

The first five lines of the first verse, the first two lines of the second verse quoted, and the whole of the third verse, seem to me to be really beautiful poetry.

Nothing could be more deeply and truly the wholeness of love,
than the lines:

She who was who I hold, the fats and flower,
Hell, wind and sea.

Nothing could concentrate for us a deeper sense of loss than the lines:

And she who lies
Like exodus a chapter from the garden,

with its evocation both of the lost Eden, lost of all eternity, and the thought that the beloved is the ground from which all the flowers of that lost Eden are grown. But the last three lines of the first verse are too obscure; they are dwarfed too in comparison with the first five and seem unreal. The last five lines of the second verse are also terribly obscure, and seem in comparison with the rest, undigested, so that we feel that Mr. Thomas has not lived through these as he has lived through the rest. The third verse again seems to me to be magnificent poetry. It is difficult, but the difficulty has been subdued more than in the lines which end the two other verses quoted. "The people's sea drives on her" is, I think, clear enough, being a term for common life, the multitude, all their prejudice.

"Drives out the father from the caesared camp" is, however, very obscure. Perhaps the father is the symbol of wisdom and gentleness.

"Shape all her whelps with the long voice of water", seems to me magnificent; so is "The country-handed grave boxed into love". If it is enquired why the grave should be country-handed, the answer is that the grave is a place of simplicity, a place of peace, and the hands of the grave are the hands of a gardener or of a countryman, used to simplicity and growth.

It would be impossible to exaggerate my feeling of excitement when I read this poem, so beautiful and moving for all its obscurities. Here, I said to myself, is a young man who has every likelihood of becoming a great poet, if only he will work hard enough at subduing his obscurity: I know of no other young poet of our time whose poetic gifts are on such great lines.

The poem I have quoted shows an enormous advance on those contained in '18 Poems' ... but these, too, contained many beauties. How fine, how true, are such lines as these, from Poem One:

I see that from these boys shall men of nothing
Stature by seedy shifting,
Or lame the air with leaping from its heats;
There from their hearts the dogdayed pulse
Of love and light bursts in their throats.
0 see the pulse of summer in the ice.
To apprehend the quality, the truth and beauty of Mr. Thomas's poems when they are at their best, we have only to compare the poem which begins with the line "A grief ago" with these lines from Mr. Archibald MacLeish's "Poems":

Therefore I will not praise your knees nor your fine walking
Telling you men shall remember your name as long
As lips move or breath is spent or the voice of English
Rings from a tongue

I shall say you were young and your arms straight and your
mouth scarlet
I shall say you will die and none will remember you
Your arms change and none remember the swish of your garments
Nor the clock of your shoe.

Mr. MacLeish, dry those tears! I, for one, shall always remember the lady (if I have the happiness to survive her) as having inspired a thoroughly jejeune, and if the truth were told, spiritually and verbally vulgar, poem ...  

Edith Sitwell.

The Spectator, CLVII (December 11, 1936), 1058.

MR. DYLAN THOMAS

Reviewers are often told to confine their attention to the book in front of them, but one cannot ignore the fact that Mr. Thomas suffers from a top-heavy reputation which is likely to come between the reviewer and the reader. Those who read the right journals and have their tips from the inmost quarter will have heard that Mr. Thomas is the most promising poet since Mr. Auden. Those - alas! more numerous - who do not may be expected to know little of Mr. Thomas beyond one or two anthology poems. Owing to this unhappy discrepancy, the reviewers of Mr. Thomas's first book, including myself, must have sounded like a convention of salesmen solely engaged in inciting the whole public to rush out and buy the book. The aim was laudable, but it largely inhibited the critical faculties. Now that probably five hundred people have bought the first book, and some of them have read it, a couple of lines should be sufficient to say that Mr. Thomas's second and latest book is not least among the half dozen volumes of poetry that will be worth buying this winter. And now no-one should be offended or "put off" by an examination of the poems themselves.

Certain obvious characteristics distinguish Mr. Thomas from his immediate predecessors. He is neither English nor American, he is
not in any ordinary sense a political poet, and he has avoided the universities. His poems are written more for the voice and less for the eye than are those of many of his contemporaries, and his imagery is superficially less esoteric and certainly less topical. These qualities, added to the vigorous and confident handling of the pentameter line, marked his earliest poems as original and independent. The theme of his poetry, which is remarkably constant, centres in paradox. Mr. Thomas is obsessed by the overlapping and interpenetration of organic and inorganic, subjective and objective, conscious and unconscious. Between each of these, for practical purposes, we impose a division; Mr. Thomas's vision is one of continuity of opposites, and in his finest poems he deliberately shifts the orthodox dividing line backwards and forwards in an attempt to state and resolve the paradox. Where the imagery is physical it tends to include and stress the macabre, where it is metaphysical there is a similar tendency to hallucination; but to describe this as surrealism is to make still more baggy an already too voluminous term. Mr. Thomas, as poets must, is extending the field of consciousness in certain directions; he is imposing order over the chaos that lies on the fringe of what, in his case, is "given". His problem appears to be to define the frontiers of personality, between "I" and "other than I".

The Twenty Five Poems now published are, I think, more difficult to read than the earlier poems. The syntax is involved and the imagery is used in a highly personal way. Few readers faced with the phrase "a ram rose", for example, will realise that "ram" connotes red for Mr. Thomas. There are also times, particularly in those poems that are cast in semi-ballad form, when Mr. Thomas is apparently coquetting with "pure" poetry and his characteristically charged lines, singly vivid, tend to reduce each other to mutual burlesque. On the whole he has been less successful than before in subduing his material to a communicable form. Twenty Five Poems may well be the pyrrhic victory that frequently marks a second book. The poems are green fruit, with an unfamiliar taste; but perhaps more finished lineaments will reveal themselves the longer we live with them. What is immediately memorable is the energetic, copious, vehement thought at work throughout. Of this there is no doubt. When in due course Mr. Thomas completes his exciting discovery of new material and sets to work to refine and clarify it he is likely to establish himself as a considerable figure outside the close atmosphere of fashion.

Desmond Hawkins.

Adelphi XIII (December 1936), 185

It was good to witness the enthusiastic reception Dylan Thomas's Eighteen Poems received in 1934 and 1935, to see the critics justly
pointing out the newness, the explosive energy, the brilliant phrase-making, the jewel in every hole; and it has been pleasant since to see the steady growth of his reputation, and to observe the praise that has almost universally been handed to him. Because the words of Miss Sitwell's recantation are pretty certain to be true - "there is no young poet of our time whose gifts are on such great lines." The only disturbing features about that exciting first book were its air of finality and its ultimate monotony, the sameness of the impression created by a large number of its poems. It seemed at times - this has been emphasised to excess - as though Dylan Thomas were fixated upon a single theme and upon one aspect of it, unable to escape from the attendant imagery of his obsession, or to employ any but a few hard-worked and heavily marked rhythms that made him sound at times for bombast like a metaphysical Kipling. And upon reflection it looked as though this strange stylistic instrument he had discovered was after all one of very limited utility, capable of repetition and slight variation perhaps, but hardly of considerable development in any direction. Luckily, Twenty-Five Poems shows that these misgivings were only partly justified.

The capacity of most readers, even most poetry readers, for unintelligibility is not very great and I suppose the prospect of having to read Dylan Thomas in an endless succession of volumes like Eighteen Poems would get even his most enthusiastic readers a bit worried. How much a consideration of this sort would weigh with him I don't know, probably not much, but there is evidence in this new book either of a half-realisation that the method of Eighteen Poems is an impasse, or of a commendable reluctance to repeat or exploit the procedure of a first success, however brilliant, by merely restringing the same poetic beads. At all events, there is more variety here, more readiness to handle new themes and to attempt fresh rhythms. The trouble is that experiment and variety seem to have been achieved only at the price of a considerable loss of power. Things like "Shall gods be said to thump the clouds" and "This bread I break was once the oat" seem tidy little poems enough, but what are they beside "Light breaks where no sun shines" and "Especially when the October sun"[sic]? It is true that there are here again enough fine lines and splendid sayings almost to make a decent reputation, and on the whole the book is certainly less strident than Eighteen Poems and less chaotic. (Wouldn't "red blood" merely have been more impressive than "brassy blood"? And wasn't the list of first lines on the contents page almost as good a poem as any in the book?) But still I found it less satisfying, the experimental parts rather flat and the rest often a bit boring, sounding in the "work in progress," where certain features of Eighteen Poems are carried to their logical conclusion, as though Dylan Thomas had begun gazing himself.

For we have repeated here many of the familiar stylistic features, and a few phrases like "death's feather" and "decked with flesh" reappear almost unaltered. There is again, too, the endless play upon words, the punning, the sitting of words that have never nodded before next to one another like a couple of buddies, and conversely,
the untwisting of phrases so that their parts scream for one another across the intervening syllables. I think of such a line as "My camel’s eye will needle through the shroud," And there are the minute alterations producing "stringing syrens," and "tail of blood" and "king of spots." This sort of thing Dylan Thomas still does with gusto if not always with very much discipline. And he still cannot resist numbers. In a reading of Twenty-five Poems I spotted "half-ghost," "twelve winds," "third eye," "sea-halved," "four-fruited," "sixth of wind," "half-way winds" and "twelve-winded marrow."

But although it is easy to catalogue such surface manifestations as these, the vital principle of this poetry is elusive. From what does all this strangeness derive? I used to think I could detect the influence of the Welsh "mesara sa caethion," but I believe he knows nothing of that involved study; but is it an influence via Hopkins who understood and reproduced in English some of the intricacies of classical Welsh prosody? I do not think so now. Perhaps, then, he has taken a hint from the Symbolists, say Rimbaud’s Le Bateau Ivre? Or plundered the English metaphysicals? Or seized and developed lines like the Miltonic "I hurl my dazzling spells into the spongy air" or "Wring me into the easy hearted man and hug him into snares"? Pure speculation this. And of more importance anyway is the future, which makes me think of the words of that French Communist, "... the fundamental problem of the living individual is knowledge upon what he intends to feed." It looks as though that is Dylan Thomas’s problem at present. And upon his answer to it, it seems to me, depends the fate of his poetry.

Glyn Jones.

The Sunday Times, 15th November 1936.

A year ago the present reviewer became convinced that a new poet had arisen who showed every promise of greatness. The work of this very young man (he is 22 years of age) is on a huge scale, both in theme and structurally - his themes are the mystery and holiness of all forms and aspects of life. He writes of the brotherhood of man with the mineral and vegetable worlds (as in the first poem in this book) - of

My man of leaves and the bronze root, mortal, immortal,
of the splendour and inexorability and fatefulness of spring -

Beginning with doom in the bulb, and the springing marvels.

In all these poems, so strangely young in their strength and vitality, all things are identified with God, who is present in "the
sensual root and the sap", and where -

.......... the summer blood
Knocked in the flesh that decked the vine.

The form of many of these poems is superb. The eighth poem, though not a sonnet either in rhyme scheme or shape, yet by its particular motion, gives the impression that here, alone among the poets of the younger generation, is one who could produce sonnets worthy of our great heritage.

INTENSE CONCENTRATION

The present danger and fault of these poems is their difficulty, which is largely the result of the intense concentration of each phrase, packed with meaning, of the fusion (not confusion) of too profound thoughts. Yet even when the poems are most difficult, the images, coming from deep within the soul, from the profound heart of nature, have a poignant and moving beauty - as in the poem which begins with the line,

A grief ago,
in which all the holiness of youthful love, the grief of loss to "the country - handed grave" (that simple nurse of grief, that country man growing flowers and corn) is concentrated.

Equally remarkable, in a completely different way, are the three poems beginning with the lines:-

The hand that signed the paper,
Should lanterns shine, the holy face,

and

I have longed to move away,

whilst much of the last poem in the book seems to me to be nothing short of magnificent, in spite of the difficulty:

Altarwise by owl-light in the halfway house.

HAUNTED BY DEATH

The whole poem is haunted by death (the strangeness is the strange unfriendliness of a tolerance by death). The theme treats of the dark soul in the midst of the deathlike state of the world:

The atlas eater with a jaw for news,
the "halfway house" (which is now the womb, now the state of the world between God and the abyss), the halfway winds which blow the uncertain soul, the space of time between death and the reawakening to God:-

That night of time under the Christward shelter and the irrevocability of "this mountain minute".

Is there not something remarkable, too, in this vision of the dark but aspiring soul,

And, manned by midnight, Jacob to the stars,

and in this passage,

Hairs of your head, then said the hollow agent, 
Are but the roots of nettles and of feathers
Over these groundworks thrusting through a pavement
And hemlock-headed in the wood of weathers,

and in these strange lines, written by one who has suffered much revelation:

As tarred with blood as the bright thorns I wept;
The world's my wound, God's Mary in her grief.

I could not name one poet of this, the younger generation, who shows so great a promise, and even so great an achievement.

Edith Sitwell.

November 22, 1936

Sir,-

I have been reading a review by Miss Sitwell of a new poet, Mr. Dylan Thomas, and wonder whether some at least of your readers will not react to him as I do. Here are some typical lines which the reviewer characterises as "nothing short of magnificent",

The atlas eater with a jaw for news,
Bit out the mandrake with to-morrow's scream.
Then, penny-eyed, that gentleman of wounds,
Old cock from nowhere and the heaven's egg.
These are not the verses of a young gentleman from the Congo who, eschewing cannibalism and Hoodoo, is cramming English with a tutor, but those of a native of this island. What do they mean?

I am no enemy to modern poetry. I can and do appreciate the magic of Mr. Roy Campbell, the subtle music of Herbert Palmer, the wit of William Soutar, or the passion of John Gawsworth, whose "The Flesh of Cyprus" admirably exemplifies the Miltonic dictum of "simple sensuous and passionate." These poets write to be understood.

The "modernists", as opposed to the "Moderns" eschew clarity. Now I maintain that clarity is the perennial characteristic of all great poets - Homer, Horace, Dante, Shakespeare. I concede that poetry will never appeal to the plain 'man in the street'. It should, however, do so to the man in Intellectual or Beautiful Street.

I venture to prophesy that posterity will willingly let the work of our obscurantists die, despite the protests of the critics of Cryptic Street, Recondite Alley, and Mystification Boulevard.

Kenneth Hare.

Sir,-

In the Sunday Times of last Sunday, Miss Edith Sitwell reviews a book of poems by Mr. Dylan Thomas. She quotes and calls magnificent these among other lines:

Abaddon in the hangnail cracked from Adam,
And, from his fork, a dog among the fairies,
The atlas eater with a jaw for news.

I am of the older generation, brought up on the Victorian poets, and frankly, I am bewildered. "Is this poetry?" I ask, like Miss Dartle, because I want to know! If it be poetry, what in the name of the muses does it mean? We used to hear that Browning was too obscure - but this!

I have tried to analyse it. Certainly a hangnail is a whitlow, is it not? It can give one hell, but why blame Adam? And is his "fork" Adam's groin, or the forked root of the mandrake? And above all, what is an "atlas-eater" - a new kind of white ant? But then it has a jaw for news - does it also eat newspapers?

No, I must be getting old and dull, for in all this thicket of words I can't glimpse a single image, unless it be a suppurating finger!
Mr. Herbert Read told us last week at the Book Exhibition that poets are now persecuted.

If this be the sort of crime they are guilty of, then out with the thumbscrews!

W. P.

Sir,-

The dithyrambs of Miss Edith Sitwell about a new poet whom she has discovered have amazed some poetry lovers and amused others.

There are three motives which actuate some discoverers of a new writer. Firstly there is the desire for notoriety. But, as Miss Sitwell occupies, temporarily at least, a minor niche on the foothills of Parnassus, that cannot apply to her.

Secondly there is the desire to pose as being cleverer than one's fellows by professing to understand what to the common herd seems incoherent and unintelligible. That motive again cannot be attributed to Miss Sitwell.

Thirdly, there is a very strong motive which sincerely affects a small number of people. I set it out as follows in a recent number of the Poetry Review:

The human mind loves to wrestle with enigmas. Thus I have often seen men of high intellectual capacity and attainments absorbed in a crossword puzzle, an acrostic or a chess problem.

The same quest to resolve the unknown must account for the fact that not a few, for the time being, are sincerely addicted to the obscurities of this "modern verse." And that poetry has this advantage over the puzzles and problems I have named, that while to each of these there is one answer and one only, every wandering, wondering quester after the meaning of a "modern" poem can find as many solutions and therefore applaud himself or herself for acumen, discernment and fertility of imagination, and feel that he or she is indeed also a potential poet.

I affirm that the worshippers of the unintelligible in poetry - and in painting and sculpture - are really worshippers of their own cleverness, victims of the Narcissus complex.

Here again, Miss Sitwell must be held exempt. Miss Sitwell's poet has something to say but he has not yet learned how to say it. The
old familiar defence of obscurity in poetry, namely, that the poetry is so closely packed with meaning that it seems difficult to understand at first sight, hardly seems to apply in this case. It looks rather as if he had not taken the trouble to make clear to himself what was in his mind. This is characteristic of some "modern" poets, as evidenced, for instance, by the abandonment of those troublesome things, metre, rhythm, and rhyme by so many of them.

Edward Vandermere Fleming

November 29, 1936

Sir,-

Two questions to Mr. Kenneth Hare, prompted by his letter about my review of Mr. Dylan Thomas's poems. When he writes of what he calls "the Miltonic dictum" of 'simple, sensuous and passionate' is he not ascribing to one great man the phrase of another? Surely the phrase is a part of the famous reply made by Hardy to Nelson's request "Kiss me Hardy."

Secondly, how does Mr. Hare know that he lives in Beautiful Street? I can see that this argument is going to turn out to be not an argument but a beauty competition, with Mr. Hare as "Mr. England," and that Mr. Thomas and I will have to retire, hopelessly outclassed.

With regard to W.P.'s letter, he evidently does want to know, so I will answer him seriously. The lines,

The atlas eater with a jaw for news
Bit out the mandrake with tomorrow's scream,

refer to the violent speed (encompassing the world in a short space of time, "eating it") and to the sensation-loving, horror loving craze of modern life. At least that is how I read the lines. And I am sorry to disappoint W. P. Mr. Thomas is a fine poet, and a very fine one.

As for Mr. Edward Vandermere Fleming, his letter was discourteous, so I will confine myself to telling him that when Mr. Thomas and I want to be taught our job by somebody who writes in the "Poetry Review" we will make the request. I would as soon ask a writer in the "Poultry Gazette" to teach me to train eagles to fly.

Edith Sitwell.
Sir,-

For the most part, the critics (I except Miss Sitwell) of the work of Mr. Dylan Thomas take instant fright and are content to tweak his tail through the bars. Mr. Thomas, they say, is all sorts of queer things, including a Marx brother. Admittedly the business of analysing his work and of assessing its worth is a tough job for them.

Miss Sitwell starts from scratch, admits the poet's obscurity, forces him into no specific compartment, and does not waste space making little jokes. What she does is to quote so intriguingly out of context that several bewildered readers, who have apparently made no reference to the book, pounce gaily upon her.

I suggest to the vast majority who find the work of this extraordinary poet incomprehensible that they should approach it by reading it aloud to themselves. Then, when the music of the words is revealed to them, and when they catch some disturbing echo of the thunderous metaphysics and symbolisms embodied in it, they may willingly undertake the more detailed analysis that work of this splendour demands.

Sir Dylan Thomas is a very young man. When he learns that he must make himself clear to others than himself, he will be a very great poet. Even now I dare state that, with the possible exception of Mr. James Joyce, he is the greatest living master of words.

Pamela Hansford Johnson.

Sir,-

Your correspondents are perplexed that Miss Sitwell should praise a seemingly meaningless poem, but I think her praise is due to her love of the sound of words, especially words in combination. Divorced from the meaning, the poem in question sounds well.

There is a modern tendency to reduce painting as well as poetry to the condition of music— which is regarded as the only pure art. Music can be enjoyed without reference to representation or literary meaning, though most of us prefer an appeal to all our faculties, as in opera.

A. Warren Dow.
Sir,-

Although my enthusiasm for Mr. Dylan Thomas's poetry has been somewhat tempered since I read his first book a year or so ago, I am strongly inclined to support Miss Sitwell against her detractors.

May I attempt to elucidate the problem briefly by asking this vital question: does poetry need an outward logical and syntactical clarity?

Modern poetry believes this traditional "surface" clarity superfluous. Does it not often defeat poets as well as readers, who all too frequently content themselves with metrical facility and technical virtuosity - to the detriment of the emotional and spiritual essence of poetry?

In Mr. Dylan Thomas's poetry there is no surface, no rational meaning, and need there be? If we think so, then it is this aesthetic theory which we must attack. The modern poem is rather the juxtaposition of powerfully conceived symbols, which induce through the poetic sensibility of the reader the emotional statement which in the poet gave rise to the poem. It is an incantation, externally meaningless even for the poet himself - except by way of psychological analysis.

This modern poetry is like modern painting, music, and architecture - frees itself from ornamental redundancies and "gets down to it."

F. J. W. Morgan.

Sir,-

The correspondents who comment on Mr. Dylan Thomas's poetry are commonly at fault for judging his work solely from Miss Sitwell's review: two of them quote the same quotation and are neatly ditched.

We can sympathise when the mature "W.R." ponders the crossword flavour of the "atlas eater with a jaw for news," but the poet is not thus dismissed; many can refute Mr. Fleming's suggestion that Mr. Thomas had not taken the trouble to make clear to himself what was in his mind, nor yet learned how to say it. The obscurity of these poems is in a reaching out beyond our conceptions of the associations of ideas and the limitations of words. It drives the modernists from Mr. Hare's traditional retreat, but between these extremes there is an appreciation of what Mr. C. Day Lewis defines as the founding of a new culture like music.
These qualities are shown in 'Poem in three parts', a clear cross-section of evolution, a short-circuiting of intellectual and emotional experience. If these make no appeal to Mr. Hare, the fault is not necessarily in the poet. It is easy to prophesy that posterity will ignore the obscurantists; but it is to hitch one's nag to a wish-cart of blindness.

Trevor Hughes.

December 13, 1936

Sir,-

It is very easy to get all hot and bothered about modern poetry; and to the end of time men will be saying "this likes me more, and this likes me less."

Miss Sitwell especially resents Mr. Vandermere-Fleming's letter. I thought his views (with which in the main I agree) were expressed moderately, and that his attitude to Miss Sitwell herself was deferential.

I must confess that the quotations from Mr. Dylan Thomas convey nothing to me, and for the present I have to take the "magnificence" on trust; but I have learned how futile it is to judge my poetry from detached extracts such as these.

There have been many revolutions in poetry, but never any like the present one. We are asked by the modern poet to abandon a 3,000 year old tradition in favour of something utterly different.

It may be that Homer, Virgil, Milton, and the rest of the great poets of the past were only babblers in the infancy of our race and must now be discarded because we live in an age of wireless, and aeroplanes, which needs a new poetic diction in which to express itself; only I think the new poet should be more patient, more understanding of and sympathetic to our difficulties, when we say that we do not understand him, and ask him to explain.

He does not often do this. On the contrary, there is a contemptuous take it or leave it attitude, that gets us nowhere; or rather sends us back slightly ashamed of our stupidity to the simple old poets that we can understand.

I believe with Wordsworth that the function of poetry is to give pleasure; "to add sunlight to daylight", which for many years is what it has done for me; and the fact that Miss Edith Sitwell with
her sensitive ear and critical faculty has acclaimed Mr. Dylan Thomas as a new star in the firmament of poetry makes me hope for new pleasure from this quarter; and something more satisfying than interpreting shorthand or solving crossword puzzles.

George Glasgow.

December 20, 1936

Sir,

I have read with considerable satisfaction the letters referring to Miss Sitwell's review of Mr. Dylan Thomas's poems. The only point that startled me was that one of your correspondents called this kind of poetry (though in inverted commas) "modern". Now, if it is anything it is old fashioned.

This particular pattern of puérilité flourished in Central Europe around 1919 and a few years later it was "dead as a door nail." Now its spectre comes to England, making, like Marley's ghost, "a dismal and appalling noise."

But is such an old revenant modern? I think the label "post-war" would be more fitting. To call it modern falsifies the issue, since the word still carries some of the splendours of youth and rebellion, which the defenders of this poetry do not deserve. Nor are the opponents necessarily backward greybeards. It does not require a reactionary to find an old-fashioned fashion ridiculous. A fashion comes better never than late.

Generally speaking, this fashion was not even new, when it was new. The "Recondite Alley" of Mr. Hare's letter is not a new street; it has been explored quite often by poets trying to reach Parnassus (they never got there, for Recondite Alley is a blind alley). Surely to hunt not the apt, but the unusual image, to chase not the right, but the rare word, to produce art by artificial means is a very common device in the history of literature. It has nothing to do with categories like "old and new", or "classic and modern." It is called by a name far more universal and as ancient as verse itself: "bad poetry".

G. K. Chesterton said once that the Prussian "is prepared to fight for old errors as if they were new truths." The letters printed in your last number seem to indicate that (barring a few exceptions) the English are not prepared to do so.

Robert Vanbery.
December 27, 1938

Sir,-

The correspondence relating to Mr. Dylan Thomas's poems has been most revealing. Of the persons who have been most impertinent to this young poet, whose work shows every promise of greatness, and who have been, incidentally, most impertinent to me, one ascribed to Milton a phrase of Keats (and one most ludicrously alien to Milton's thought); another is a contributor to the "Poetry Review"; and third, Mr. Vanbery from Oxford, produces English sentences of this kind:

Surely to hunt not the apt, but the unusual image, to chase not the right, but the rare word, to produce art by artificial means is a very common device in the history of literature.

When I was a girl, a good many people in the country "took up music." After all, they had to have some interest, they had to show a brave face to the world. They played the piano a little, and lamely, choosing the easier pieces of Chopin, after dinner. But if, say Busoni or Paderewski gave an opinion on piano playing, these innocent rustics did not feel called upon to contradict them flatly.

However, at the time when (as we learned from the 'Sunday Times' last week) Mr. F. L. Lucas is acclaimed for showing Coleridge where he can get off as a critic, we may expect anything. Will he not show Coleridge where he gets off (in 'Khubla Khan', 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'Christabel') as a poet?

But to return to our sheep ... yes, I think sheep, in this case, is better than mutton.

Mr. Vanbery is entirely wrong in saying apropos of Mr. Thomas's poems, that "this particular pattern of puerility flourished in Central Europe around 1919." I am sorry to contradict such an expert, but Mr. Thomas's poems bear no relation whatsoever, technically, or in thought and feeling, to the verse of which Mr. Vanbery speaks; and they are not puerile.

And now, as these gentlemen are obviously fitted, both by nature and by learning to instruct me in the art of poetry, perhaps they will be good enough to tell me what is wrong technically with Mr. Thomas's poems, and the technical reasons for this wrongness. I am notoriously an ignoramus in these matters. If these gentlemen can show where Mr. Thomas goes wrong technically, we shall acknowledge their right to criticise him. I hold that they cannot and have shown that they cannot.
On the other hand, if you sir, would like me to show technical reasons why I know that Mr. Thomas is a fine poet, I can, and will, do so.

I would like to assure Mr. Glasgow that poets are patient, are understanding of and sympathetic to the difficulties of readers who say that they do not understand, and ask poets to explain.

Our only impatience is with conceited persons who proclaim that because they cannot understand a poem immediately, it has no meaning.

Edith Sitwell.

Times Literary Supplement, 19th September 1936, p.750.

Mr. Thomas's language as a poet is so much his own that it often is as difficult to interpret as a foreign tongue. One of his poems, for example, opens with the following stanzas:

How soon the servant sun,
(Sir morrow mark),
Can time unriddle, and the cupboard stone,
(Fog has a bone
He'll trumpet into meat),
Unshelve that all my gristles have a gown
And the naked egg stand straight,

Sir morrow at his sponge,
(The wound records),
The nurse of giants by the cut sea basin,
(Fog by his spring
Soaks up the sewing tides),
Tells you and you, my masters, as his strange
Man morrow blows through food.

The rest of the poem is no less obscure and there are many others of which the meaning is equally hard to unravel, nor is the reader aided by any explanatory notes in his struggle with the apparently unintelligible. That Mr. Thomas is essentially a poet is certainly proved by the symbolical quality of his language. He writes in images peculiar to himself, but so intensely conceived that it is only when we cease trying to explain them to the reason that we begin to grasp the quality of experience they communicate. To quote one of his own definitions of this surrender to a new mode of consciousness:
What's never known is safest in this life.
Under the sky-signs they who have no arms
Have cleanest hands, and as the heartless ghost
Alone's unhurt, so the blind man sees best.

Yet even those who are prepared to adventure into the unknown will find much in these poems that is baffling. And it is in the simpler of them, such as "This bread I break", "Why East wind chills", "Ears in the turrets hear", "I have longed to move away" or in the magnificent triumph song over death beginning "And death shall have no dominion" that the highly original quality of his idiom and of his vision may best be appreciated.

New English Weekly, October 1, 1936, p.409

The most part of the poems of Dylan Thomas here published display a tremendous and chaotic rhetoric, the product of a boisterous, almost brutal, Fancy, but unshaped by the power of Imagination. At its worst it is of the hymnal variety:—

And in the mighty mornings of the earth;
Hell in a horn of sulphur and the cloven myth,
All heaven in a midnight of the sun, etc.

or,

Man-in-seed, in seed-at-zero
From the foreign fields of space,
Shall not thunder on the town
With a star-flanked garrison.

But, at its best, —

With priest and pharaoh bed her gentle wound
World in the sand, on the triangle landscape,
With stones of odyssey for ash and garland
And rivers of the dead around my neck,

it becomes a really strong dramatic poem, as in some of the shorter poems. Iambic pentameters are generally a pitfall for Mr. Thomas. Most of the poems written in that metre seem to have no better reason for coming to an end than that his plethora fancy has for the time being run out. They have all the faults of rhetorical verse, being spattered with imperatives and vocatives and unspecified personal pronouns, and the method too often seems to be one of redecoration and elaboration of a single bold line, so that eventually we find the
poet stringing together lines of monotonously equal quantity, till the cartridge of images hammers the ears of deafness:

First there was the lamb on knocking knees
And three dead seasons on a climbing grave,
And Adam wether in the flock of horns,
Butt of the tree-tailed worm that mounted Eve,
Horned down with skullfoot and the skull of toes
On thunderous pavements in the garden time.

Imagination concentrates the intensity of vision upon the object. Fancy without the imagination diffuses vision, disintegrating the associations of verse till it breaks down into a gradually weakening stream of rhetoric. Imagination packs words with every possible social reference. Fancy dissociates them from any social reference at all.

We have here first of all, then, a terrific literary vitality; a pure delight in words as words, rather than in the things for which they are signs; a delight characteristic of people like the Irish handling a language that is not natural to them. It is English like that spoken by the Irish peasants without historical modifications: words like "merry" and "gentleman" appear with their Elizabethan rather than their modern value. Accompanying this a completely hard un-sentimental masculine appreciation of a very wide vocabulary, perhaps only equalled among living writers by Mr. Yeats. Finally, five or six poems ('This bread I break', 'Why East wind chills', 'Ears in the turrets hear', for example) which are real poems, integrated by the force of imagination, not diffusions of the element of poetry

Randall Swingler.


Children are delighted by a Lord Mayor's Show or Coronation Day of glittering and resonant syllables, and at a pinch they are prepared to do without a meaning or a story: it is enough to have the giants and the dwarfs. So, too, the schoolboy decorates his essay with irrelevant, high-sounding words, and most of us, especially those who "have no time for poetry", remain more or less at the mercy of phrases which are grandiloquent but meaningless. These rhetorical and senuous effects are distrusted and disliked by the logician, and they are admired and exploited by the poet and the orator. At times they are used to hide bad logic; at other times they are used to impress a truth more deeply. Sometimes they are used like notes in music, purely for their own sake, and not for the sake of any logical significance.
The poems of Mr. Dylan Thomas should, I think, first be read in this way: unless the reader can first enjoy the rhetorical and sensuous imagery he is not likely to attach much value to any sense that he may ferret out:

I, in my intricate image, stride on two levels,
Forged in man's minerals, the brassy orator
Laying my ghost in metal,
The scales of this twin world tread on the double,
My half ghost in armour hold hard in death's corridor,
To my man-iron sidle.

Not that these poems are often difficult to understand: Mr. Thomas is not a remarkably prophetic or intellectual poet, and, allowing for a tinge of D. H. Lawrence, many of the statements in these poems are the familiar material of lyric poetry:

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 might
Laid the crops low, broke the grapes joy.

The value of such a lyric does not depend on the truth or importance of the statement, but on the accuracy with which the poem expresses the mood in which the statement is believed. Often, however, Mr. Dylan Thomas's poems do not aim at crystallising a mood: they are variations on a theme which is first stated: "Why east wind chills and south wind cools," and then followed by a series of varying and contrasting images:

Why silk is soft and the stone wounds
The child shall question all his days,

and the lines are held together by pictorial relations and verbal rhetoric rather than by any developing argument or sentiment. As long as the images are vividly presented to the senses, the poems are effective, but the Lord Mayor's Show effect may grow monotonous, and at times Mr. Thomas allows purely verbal associations to run away with him:

Button your bodice on a hump of splinters,
My camel's eyes will needle through the shroud.
Love's reflection of the mushroom features,
Still's snapped at night in the bread-sided field,
Once close-up smiling in the wall of pictures,
Ark-lamped thrown back upon the cutting flood.

When this happens, the reader becomes aware of the words simply as items from the dictionary, and not as images of real things, and immediately the procession stops, and becomes a mere riot of noise. Mr. Thomas himself is undoubtedly alive to the sound and colour of his words, and he commands a large and personal vocabulary. It is a
pity that he sometimes gives the impression of using it merely to make a schoolboy exhibition.

Michael Roberts.

Time and Tide (October 24, 1936), p.1483.

The Blown Word

Among all the poets who came roaring in on the flood tide of anarchy and opportunity a year or so ago, none made a bigger and better splash than Dylan Thomas. His crawl stroke was sensational, he wore seaweed in his hair and comported himself like a Marx brother, so that many feared he would exhaust his energies and drown. He is still in the big swim, spawning these sort of bubbles:

Let the tale's sailor from a Christian voyage
At lastwide hold halfway off the dummy bay
Time's shipwrecked gospel on the globe I balance;
So shall winged harbours through the rockbirds eyes
Spot the blown word, and on the seas I image
December's thorn screwed in a brow of holly.
Let the first Peter from the rainbow's quayrail
Ask the tall fish swept by the bible east,
What rhubarb man peeled in her foamblue channel
Has sown a flying garden round that seaghost.

Poor Tom or Lear mad could do you no better than this, but a book of it is like an unconduted tour of Bedlam, or a night out in the land of gibbering highbrows. What an eye the fellow has, but what a wild one, with what a bloodshot roll and squint; and what mind, too, if he could find a use for it. Had Dylan been born an Elizabethan, and forced to scribble drammers for the pit, we might have seen another Webster, at the least. As it is, the sheer sly fun of launching violent images engages all his attention; and they all run into little formal backwaters as like as two peasecods.

Those familiar with Mr. Thomas's criticism will realize that he is not incorrigibly daft or incapable of rational thought, above the unconscious levels. It is just his common sense and fastidiousness, no doubt, that has kept him outside the literary and political rackets. But that in turn has left him without any background or pivot to his dizzy world, and exiled him like a 'bexprezornik', a wilful child of almost slavic instability. This separates him from such a poet as Auden, with whom, in respect of least of energy, vocabulary and
vision - and with due respect to other poets with other gifts - he can at any rate stand comparison. "There was a time", etc.:

But time has set its maggots in their track.
Under the arc of sky they are unsafe.

Those famous "belief" problems we have heard so much about - they are, who can doubt, of fundamental importance. And when even the faith in communism shakes, we are left with nothing good in poetry between this wild tempestuous stuff and the cold bitter spring of our only considerable Christian, Mr. Eliot. O nunce, court holywater in a dry house is better than this rain-water out o door. It is a matter of taste; but Mr. Dylan Thomas' shower-bath is, in an arid age, extremely refreshing.

Hugh Gordon Porteus.

The Daily Worker, December 2, 1936, p.iii.

Dylan Thomas is a remarkable poet - perhaps, even, a poet of genius - but he is far from clear and straightforward.

His work just contains, in rich, prodigious quantities, the material of poetry, which bursts out of him like the guts of a horse which has been gored by a bull in the arena. I use this unpleasant simile because the poetry itself is unpleasant - or at all events it reminds one constantly of internal organs.

Take up the book at any point and you will find effective ranting like this:-

The seed-at-zero shall not storm ... [Whole stanza quoted]

It is obscure, not particularly interesting, but yet very striking and undoubtedly the imagery and language are always poetic. The trouble is that Thomas's poetry is turned on like a tap; it is just poetic stuff with no beginning nor end, shape, or intelligent and intelligible control.

Stephen Spender.
For some time Mr. Thomas's first book of poems, published two years ago, has been out of print. It is available now in a new edition, and I advise the reader to buy a copy, not only because it is remarkable in itself, but because without it he will find the new volume puzzling in the extreme. Violence, obscurity, immense personal vanity, a preoccupation with sex and death, a love of the crazy image and the staggering conceit - these are likely to be one's first impression of 'Twenty-Five Poems'. Poets have juggled with the universe before, ruffling the pages of history like a pack of cards and producing planets from their coat tails, but Mr. Thomas sometimes lets the trick go too far; he too is swept away, and the result is mad parody.

And from the windy west came two gunned Gabriel,
From Jesu's sleeve trumped up the king of spots,
The sheath-decked jacks, queen with a shuffled heart;
Said the fake gentleman in suit of spades,
Black-tongued and tipsy from salvation's bottle,
Rose my Byzantine Adam in the night;
For loss of blood I fell on Ishmael's plain,
Under the milky mushrooms slew my hunger;
A climbing sea from Asia had me down
And Jonah's Moby snatched me by the hair;
Cross-stroked salt Adam to the frozen angel
Pin-legged on pole-hills with a black medusa
By waste seas where the white bear quoted Virgil
And sirens singing from our lady's sea-straw.

That, on any account is bad; it is, however, understandable to one who is familiar with his earlier work, as an attempt, however unsuccessful, to mix it with violence. Single lines echo the genuine style of:

The dry Sargasso of the tomb
Gives up its dead to such a working sea ....

I see the boys of summer in their ruin
Lay the gold tithings barren,
Setting no store by harvest, freeze the soil ..... 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.

Comes like a scissors stalking, tailor age ...
A candle in the thighs  
Warms youth and seed and burns the seeds of age ....

There round about your stones the shades  
Of children go who, from their voids  
Cry to the dolphined sea.

It is an unmistakeable imagery, which delights in paradox and finds grandeur unexpectedly. The association of extremes, of summer and decay, lust and death, for forebodings of the child in the womb, the wild geography of the body embracing the universe, appear in poem after poem.

'Eighteen Poems' - from which I have been quoting - is the record of a volcanic adolescence, and quite unlike any other book I know. Although the poems seem, at a glance to make a sequence, it will be found not so much that one follows another, as that they form a cluster. A few essential experiences - "birth, and copulation, and death", as Sweeney says - are repeated and varied; each poem drops like a bomb and either explodes with a queer vision of limbs and matchwood or buries itself in earth. Intensity rather than development is the characteristic of Mr. Thomas's mind.

It has taken a long time to reach his new volume, the 'Twenty-Five poems' published by Dent. I am in a dilemma; they seem to me disappointing. True, I have not read them often enough. But comparing the two volumes I can see that now Mr. Thomas sometimes substitutes force for spontaneity, that he has developed a taste for cosmic joking, numerical conceits, private allusions. Some poems in the earlier style are chaotic and the rhetoric cracks; on the other hand, the newer ones, though simple enough, are less individual:

This bread I break was once the oat etc.

This simplicity (repeated in three or four other poems) is in strange contrast to the blowing and spouting, the eerie bombast of the rest of the book. "Now that my symbols have out-elbowed space", one verse begins. Mr. Dylan Thomas is a born fanfaronader. He is also a really original poet; though for the moment, perhaps, wondering which way to turn.

G. W. Stonier.
Mr. Dylan Thomas is a very different kind of writer from Roy Campbell: vouched for by Edith Sitwell, but interesting. There is no doubt that he is highly talented and genuinely original. In general his manner is obscure with surrealist affinities.

And in the pincers of the boiling circle ... [Whole stanza quoted]

There are included in this volume some very early poems written in a comparatively academic style, which, however, reveal already Mr. Thomas's gift of phrase and integrity of vision. It is to be hoped that his next book will further the development of his present phase, which does not give the impression of being one that ought to be persisted in ... 

Gilbert Armitage.

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DYLANTHOMAS

These poems strike one immediately because of their resonance (sometimes their rhythm is monotonous), their swirl of vigorous images, and even before they are understood, their flavour of psychological and metaphysics. They divide more or less clearly into sense and nonsense-poems.

A. The sense-poems (see pp. 7, 13, 17, 14, 23, 29, 33, 34, 35) are with one exception rhetorical. By "rhetorical" I mean that they are word-poetry, that they made great use of symbols and little of direct statement, that they build to the side of their subject and that the complete poem is then, so to speak, pointed at its subject. An example of this sort of poetry is Poe's

Lo Death has reared himself to throne
In a strange city lying alone
Far down within the dim West ... 

An example of the opposite sort, in which the poetry seems to become its subject, is Wilfred Owen's "Move him into the sun ... " Compare Mr. Thomas on the subject of "self and Robinson Crusoe marooned on his island":

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The English Review, LXIV (February 1937), 254.

New Verse, No. 23, Xmas 1936.
Ears in this island hear
The wind pass like a fire,
Eyes in this island see
Ships anchor off the bay.
Shall I run to the ships
With the wind in my hair,
Or stay till the day I die
And welcome no sailor?
Ships hold you poison or grapes?

This seems to me good poetry, but the vices which entrap this kind are obviously:

1) That it becomes high faluting or over-literary, for example on p.14:

A worm tells summer better than the clock
The slug's a living calendar of days.

2) That the images, instead of poetically illuminating a thing and its significance, simply fix and decorate the thought about it: for example on p.34 time is referred to as "the quiet gentleman whose beard wags in Egyptian wind"; and on p.39 there is the line, "And the unicorn evils run them through."

B. The nonsense-poems. These are also "rhetorical", except that they do not point at any apparent subject. They speak certainly at the top of the voice, are giddily crammed with images, and trap-doored with private allusions:

A climbing sea from Asia had me down
And Jonah's Moby snatched me by the hair,
Cross-stroked salt Adam to the frozen angel
Pin-legged on pole-hills with a black medusa
By waste seas where the white bear quoted Virgil
And sirens singing from our lady's sea-straw.

Particularly at a time when poetry has a small audience and a great many enemies, it does seem to me that this sort of writing is not only not worthwhile but harmful. It seems a pity, when poetry is losing its squint and is getting the corresponding power to use the concise and direct statement, that highly allusive and spinning-its-web-in-the-corner poetry should be written at all, even when it is good of its kind. (This is not by the way, surrealist poetry, or precipitations from the subconscious. It has plainly been worked over for emotional effect.)

This book ought to be bought because the author has published elsewhere, poems so good as "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower", also because there are some poems in this collection too where his fertility and remarkable sensitiveness to words does
really ring a bell. There is, for example, a poem on p.33 where he has concentrated the peculiar horror and mindlessness of modern politics:

... A hand rules pity as a hand rules heaven;
Hands have no tears to flow.

C.B.S.
Bernard Spencer

The Manchester Guardian, October 6, 1936, p.6.

Mr. Dylan Thomas again gives his poems numbers but not names. "Twenty-five" replaces "18" in the title of his second book, Twenty-five Poems (Dent, 2s.6d.), and the poems in it follow each other blindly, with nothing at the head of any to hint at what it is about, and very little in the body either. If he was obscure before he is deeply dark and cryptic now. His sole mode of expression is still imagery; but if imagery, however original and powerful and beautiful, defies interpretation, as most of that in this book undeniably does, what is the use of it, except to declare that the writer is a poet? Verse that is inaccessible to the reader's mind or heart may merit the serious consideration that Mr. Thomas's publishers say his does, but how is the reader to know that? Consider for instance:

How soon the servant sun,
(Sir morrow mark),
Can time unriddle, and the cupboard stone,
(Fog has a bone
He'll trumpet into meat),
Unshelve that all my gristles have a gown
And the naked egg stand straight,

Sir morrow at his sponge,
(The wound records),
The nurse of giants by the cut sea basin,
(Fog by his spring
Soaks up the sewing tides),
Tells you and you, my masters, as his strange
Man morrow blows through food.

Three more verses complete the poem - and the reader's frustration.

C.P.
... Mr. Thomas undoubtedly speaks with his own voice. His is not the kind of verse which I can at present read with aesthetic understanding; it is nonsense, and meant to be: but his use of words is exciting and quite individual, he is constantly producing images of remarkable clarity and evocative power, and a number of these poems do, I feel, present a self-imposed unity beneath the apparently aimless flux of imagery. His publishers, clearly at a loss for something to say about his verse, call it 'Bionysiac': in the sense that he is intoxicated with words, this is accurate enough. There is also a nervous exacerbation not far below the surface of these poems, a latent hysteria which produces sometimes a rhythm and diction akin to that of Beddoes:

And death shall have no dominion.
Dead men naked they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.

C. Day Lewis.

Dylan Thomas's "Twenty-five Poems" is out today. It is my good fortune to have to do no more than indicate the contents of the book. Each new age must interpret itself. It might be considered good fooling, among those of the Tennysonian and Lewis Morris age, to pick out lines from some of these poems, and ask derisively what they mean. But, to use a term of to-day, there's more to it than that.

A Glamorgan Poem.

Among the Twenty-five Poems is one that starts in this way:
"Hold hard, these ancient minutes in the cuckoo's month,  
Under the lank, fourth folly on Glamorgan's hill,  
As the green blooms ride upwards, to the drive of time . . ."

As I read and re-read this poem, sometimes I think I know what it's all about: and then doubt grips me. And then I say: The answer's a lemon.

He has Arrived.

A verse picked out of another poem:

"Now  
Say nay  
So star fall,  
So the ball fall,  
So solve the mystic sun, the wife of light,  
The sun that leaps on petals, through a nought,  
The come-a-cropper rider of the flower."

But it won't do to be wonderfully clever, and laugh like a hyena. For Dylan Thomas has 'arrived', and the new poetry cannot be nonsense, else many a distinguished figure in the literary world would not have blessed it.

Straight Poems

The majority of the Twenty-five Poems are difficult. Personally, I have not the remotest notion what they mean. One can catch a splendid line here, there, or warm to a fine thought. But Dylan Thomas has very little from the Tennysonian.

There are one or two straight poems, where one feels his feet under him. Such as:

"This bread I break was once the oat  
This wine upon a foreign tree  
Plunged in its fruit . . ."

Hopeless Youth.

Youth in 1936 has no cause to emulate the robust optimism of the Pippa "All's well with the world" type.

Dylan Thomas has a poem, starting: "Was there a time when dancers with their fiddles in children's circuses could stay their troubles," and ending in these four lines:
"What's never known is safest in this life. 
Under the skysigns they who have no arms
Have cleanest hands, and, as the heartless ghost
Alone's unhurt, so the blind man sees best."

His Newspaper Career

"Twenty-five Poems" will form the subject of a special article in
the "Herald of Wales" next week by J.D.W.

This will deal with his adventures as a young reporter in the
"Evening Post" office, recalling one joyous experience when he went
to a Swansea chapel concert to "appreciate" Hiawatha," and put on the
"sub's" table an onslaught on Longfellow!

A series of articles on the Poets of Swansea will also be
referred to.


NEW POEMS BY DYLAN THOMAS

Some of His Joyous Adventures in a Newspaper Office

by J. D. W.
(Written shortly before his death)

When Dylan Thomas's "Eighteen Poems" was published last year, des-
pairing of ever making anything of poems, none of which brought the
least understanding to me, I passed over the task of reviewing the
book to a young contemporary of the poet.

He found in it a great treasure; and he said so. I wish he
were handy just now, when Dylan Thomas's second volume is out of the
press: "Twenty-five Poems" (Dent: 2s. 6d.). As he is not, it is
my job to say something about them. And as I cannot say much about
them, I may say a little about him.

x x x

Dylan Thomas is the son of the English master at the Swansea Grammar
School. He is in his twenties, the early twenties I should say. I
saw him first on the stage, a schoolboy playing in the annual drama show of the Grammar School, Cromwell, I think, in Drinkwater's pageant. It was obvious to the most dense person in the Llewelyn Hall that here was a clean-cut personality. He stood out shoulder high above the rest of the cast: not alone because his part called for it, but because of a certain distinction of voice and hearing.

It was only upon the Grammar School stage that Dylan Thomas then brought credit to the School: I do not believe he sat an examination, and that he left without a certificate!

x x x

In the next stage he was a beginner in Swansea journalism, under strict injunctions to learn shorthand within a definite time! It was good discipline, I thought, as I saw him moving about amid the inquests, the police courts, the district council meetings; "making the calls" at those places where newspapers gather their news. But Dylan Thomas never mastered shorthand - did he ever try? - and his career in the reporting room of the "Evening Post" was entertaining, but a sore trial to the chief reporter, who had to see that all the engagements on the "Book" were covered.

I recall a few enlivening incidents. I remember a sub-editor coming to me, with a long face, for assistance in trouble. Mysterly he handed me "copy" written by Dylan Thomas about a chapel concert at ——— the night before. The music was Coleridge-Taylor's setting of parts of Longfellow's "Hiawatha."

As I turned the pages, I said to myself, as a reviewer said long ago "This will never do." "Cythraul Canu" would have been unleashed in Swansea that night were unexpurgated Dylan Thomas on the music, the poem and the performance, to have been published. For, as an introduction of some two or three "sticke," Mr. Longfellow was placed in his dustbin, as a gentle prelude to most slighting treatment of composer and singers. And although longfellow has passed out of fashion, there were too many followers of his poems in Swansea, and indeed too many lovers of the music of "Hiawatha," to have them flouted by a youth whose competency to ride roughshod over the older generation had not been established.

A milder and sedater report of the concert appeared in the "Evening Post" that night. The incident may have its interest in calculating Dylan Thomas's career: it was the first running up of the flag by youth without respect for the achievements of the Victorians.

x x x

Dylan Thomas, of course, was not cut out for reporting and shorthand. But the time could not have been wasted: for one thing he wrote, for the "Herald of Wales," week by week until the subject had been exhausted and the Swansea poets all labelled truly, a series upon the verse...
writers from Ann of Swansea down to Howard Harris. It was a series that gave me dreadful pangs; it was heart-breaking to give the right of way to an irreverent youth who, week after week, turned in articles in which all that one felt to be established in art was knocked roughly over. Once or twice I persuaded the young iconoclast to moderate a judgement here and there; to be gentler with this and that poet. One of the living Swansea poets felt his hand sorely even after the restraining influence had tempered the wind to the shorn lamb.

James Chapman Woods, however, whose privately-issued poems I had turned over to this disector, took his medicine like the great gentleman he was; he wrote Dylan Thomas a charming letter of true appreciation. He was the first of the poets to see the new star coming above the horizon.

There was also a short story which the poet submitted for publication in the "Herald of Wales." All that I can recall about it now is that it was sited in a mining valley, and that it ended with a head in the gas stove. This never would have done for the "Herald"; laughingly we agreed that it would not. I see now that, as it stood, it would have had a considerable success in the magazines that cater for the upper intelligence.

\[x x x\]

Dylan Thomas's press career ended. His shorthand did not become efficient enough to help him at a mother's meeting. He left us, and presently embarked on his London adventure. I think it was just about this time that he wrote for the "Herald of Wales" a poem about the "Electra" in Mrs. Bertie Perkins's garden at Sketty, an exquisitely lovely piece of work (not a bit in his "modern" manner) that gave distinction to one week's issue of this journal.

In London he made phenomenal progress - among the upper intelligences. Poems of his began to appear here and there in the magazines that circulate in Chelsea, and where the high-brows congregate. He began to make the grade. He was in "The Criterion." He was in "The Listener." A story was included in a collection of the year's best short stories. Then "Eighteen Poems" appeared.

\[x x x\]

I think that I am very successfully circumventing the task of reviewing "Twenty-Five Poems"! Frankly, most of them are outside my range.

Consider:

"Now
Say nay,
So star fall,
So the ball fail,
So solve the mystic sun, the wife of light,
The sun that leaps on petals through a nought,
The come-a-cropper rider of the flower."
Now what am I, child of the Victorian Day, who loves the sweetness and lucidity of Tennyson, who even swims in the enjoyment of Lewis Morris, who still turns to Wordsworth for sustenance—what am I to make of this? Or:

"Hold hard, these ancient minutes in the cuckoo's mouth
Under the lank, fourth folly on Glamorgan's hill,
As the green blooms rise upward, to the drive of time;
Time, in a folly's rider, like a county man,
Over the vault of ridings with his hound at heel,
Drives forth my men, my children, from the hanging south."

xxx

A line here of splendid imagery: "Here in this spring, stars float along the void"; or "beginning with doom in the bulb, the spring unravels," can thrill me; but for my sins, for my imprisonment in my own times, I am condemned to read most of these Twenty-Five Poems with uncomprehending heart and eyes. Let it be said for my salvation that I am conscious of my loss. The poets of "Thirty-Six" have opened a new page. We of the Eighties and Nineties had better stick to our Wordsworth and our Tennyson; even to our Russell Lowell.

A few poems there are in this collection that convey meaning without shedding of blood to such an ancient as I; like: "This bread I break was once the oat, This wine upon a foreign tree Plunged in its fruit." And "Was there a time when dancers with their fiddles, in children's circuses could stay their troubles?" with its last few lines:

"What's never known is safest in this life.
Under the skysigns they who have no arms
Have cleanest hands, and, as the heartless ghost
Alone's unhurt, so the blind man sees best."

Even a Victorian can be thrilled by that! But what miles away from the robust sanity of the poets who were our Gods!

Purpose, Vol. 9, April - June 1937.

REVIEWS

Mr. Thomas and Mr. Auden
Composition without rhythm is a frost. Moreover, the poet waits upon the material world.

I am keeping to the first two of the books listed. Paul Eluard has already been much discussed (with a note on 'Thorns of Thunder' by the present writer, 'New English Weekly', 13/7/36). So has F6, which is a better and more serious play than the 'Dog Beneath the Skin', though less exhilarating. Its poetical content is nugatory, which adds to the latest book's importance. Mr. McLeish makes another attempt to convince us that he is a poet, and I should be glad to believe it if I could. His verse does not catch fire, for various reasons - the chief one heads this article - still, he has contemporaneity of a sort. Mr. Johnston has not.

"Or rather, having been there first, I note that if I was in any sense the revolution, I have been followed by the counter-revolution" (Ezra Pound, preface to 'Active Anthology'). The severity of that "reaction" confronts those of my own generation who are least satisfied with it, not only in versification, but on almost every plane. The revitalisation of English poetry that took place twenty years ago was owing to the admission of a fresh and highly desirable 'content'; but the work of that period which survives does so on merits of a more technical kind. So I will emphasise but not here investigate the obvious effects of the sort of intellectual and social attitude I am referring to, upon the product of a salvationist's art. And (apart from such as the crude 'satire', No. XIV) even Auden's genius at its finest suffers this deterioration:

Since the external disorder, the extravagant lies,
The baroque frontiers, the surrealist police;
What can truth treasure, or heart bless,
But a narrow strictness?

(Either of my underlined words would have done in subtler company).

It may be impolite to proffer reasons for Mr. Auden's poetical standstill since his first book. I no longer think it is quite the same lack of drive that affected Flecker. But he has harnessed his powers to a set of ideas that are surely, some of them, worn out in 1937.

Not that the reaction of one generation to/against its predecessor possesses much value or interest - without some foundation in our old friend, the Material World. Audenesque Communism is religious as well as, I suppose, political and economic; but if the material
supports were by any chance to be removed, quite a lot of the superstructure might have to go with it; as is the way with half- and quarter-truths. The spiritual prepossessions of that section of my generation on whose behalf I perhaps rashly am speaking, are not the same as those of Mr. Auden's, nor have they, I believe, the same source. There may be no credit for the change; but a doubt seems to be gathering amongst us, whether even the material picture has its correlate 'in re', whether Mr. Auden is not very largely an Idealist, in the medieval sense (and that is not principally in any 'Utopian' direction, for perfection is the concern of art; even, I take it, on the "wish fulfillment" of the wretched Freudian "metapsychics").

The precocity of Mr. Auden's talent led him to form early on a manner so sure and so inviting as to be almost dangerously facile. This book attests, however, that he has not been idle in experiment during the last five years. And this is also its chief interest. Nevertheless, in a collection of verse very little homogeneous and brimful of meaning, I find in most cases that the formal element is least satisfactory, and in this sense it is a 'transitional' miscellany. What surprises me, is that experimenting so vigorously he has chosen to exploit so many set forms - sonnets (orthodox), quasi-sapphics, and shorter lyrics, all more or less regular in rhyme and strophe. This is no doubt good practice and perhaps good discipline for Auden himself, but the more substantial poems are weaker as a result, and Nos. II and XVII of the longer ones, just miss being magnificent statements because of it (the former has a curious hymnal turn, I take it consciously, but like so much of Auden's satire remains too near the original). The fact seems to be that in the decomposition of his early style Auden's verse has got a new flexibility and naturalness of manner, but has not yet found a rhythm to match; and this being something deeper than 'technique', I hope I have not been irreverent (or irrelevant) in suggesting some of the forces that may be helping to retard his progress.

But if the British thump of blank verse makes it rather dismal recurrence in Mr. Auden's case, it practically stultifies Mr. Dylan Thomas. That takes away any justification I might have had in rounding off this generation-conscious article by the use of Mr. Thomas as a stick to beat Mr. Auden (et cie) with. Dylan is by far the greater 'reactionary' of the two when it comes to giving a creative lead to poetry at this date.

The one thing he seems to have in common with his elder issues in opposite results. This is his vocabulary which is marvellous, more remarkable even than Auden's - or, at any rate, freer - possibly because it is quite unreined. The richness of this factor in Auden's verse comes from his intelligence and his interest in the world outside him. Dylan's language is subjective, with its roots in the sub- or at most half-conscious; as with Wilde's epigrams, one is never sure if his words intend so full meaning as it is possible to attach to them.
It is not the business of criticism to lay down rules for artists to obey; all the same, no other late-romantic influence could be more inept as a central method for the present time than surrealism. And I think Mr. Auden would be of the same opinion. Yet Thomas has beyond doubt given us original, effective and, within limits, contemporary exemplification of that method. It will be of the highest interest to see if a poet of such strong individuality can transcend the very narrow utility of a mode with which he certainly appears to identify himself at the moment. If, of course, he is really nothing but another surrealist, his total rhythmic failure is not surprising, even when it dulls the brilliance of such lines as:

I hear content, and 'Be content'
Ring like a handbell through the corridors,
And 'Know no answer', and I know
No answer to the children's cry
Of echo's answer and the man of frost
And ghostly comets over the raised fists.

This is, nevertheless, superb, and the poem with the refrain 'Hold you poison or grapes!' is nearly as good. But on every page you have a rhythmic deadness (or almost a nullity, in the poems where blank verse is abandoned for a purely verbal pattern - even the few efforts at rhythmic cohesion in his first book are missing here). This is at its worst in the ten final sonnets, that otherwise contain the most interesting material of all. Which goes to support the platitude that newness itself is very seldom at fault, but only so when conjoined with elements taken over uncritically from the old.

Michael F. Cullis.
Clarity are, however, very impressive:

Beyond this island bound
By a thin sea of flesh
And a bone coast,
The land lies out of sound
And the hills out of mind.
No birds or flying fish
Disturbs this island's rest.

and

The sea speaks in a kingly voice

but even the comparatively unsuccessful poems are readable because of their melodramatic imagery:

Murmur of spring nor crush the cockerel's eggs,
Nor hammer back a season in the figs;
But graft these four-ruited ridings on your country;
Farmer in time of frost and burning leagues,
By red-eyed orchards sow the seeds of snow,
In your young years the vegetable century.

Nor when my love lies in the cross-boned drift
Naked among the bow-and-arrow birds
Shall you turn cockwise on a tufted axle.

Even if Mr. Thomas is carried away by the sound of what he writes, it is to his credit that he can write so fluently and, in his own peculiar idiom, so uniformly well. The value of many of these poems may be questioned but the faults they reveal are promising ones in a young writer, and there can be no doubt that Mr. Thomas' talent is a genuine one.

G. B. E.

The Fortnightly Review, CLXI (February 1937), 248.

... Mr. Dylan Thomas, too, is wordy, drunk with words. Not that he cannot be "simple" enough at times, as in "This break I break" or "The hand that signed the paper"; but usually he obtains his effect more by the hammer-blow of a fist in the face than by any clear-voiced argument. It is impossible to tell what many of his lines may mean:
And in the pincers of the boiling circle,
The sea and instrument, nicked in the locks of time,
My great blood's iron single
In the pouring town,
I, in a wind on fire, from green Adam's cradle.
No man more magical, clawed out the crocodile.

The total effect is of a sort of revivalism, the same plangent rhythms,
the same sounding phrases that go beyond meaning and convey, more by
music than by sense, the apocalypse that has been the poet's undoubted
inspiration. One day, maybe, he will descend from the mountain and
translate his vision into comprehensible terms . . .

C. Henry Warren.

University College of South Wales Magazine (Cap and Gown), XXXIV
(March 1937), 8.

A NEW NAME IN POETRY

During the last few months letters have been flung with some warmth
to and fro in the Press over the head of a young Welsh poet named
Dylan Thomas, the publication of whose "Twenty-five Poems" last
Autumn immediately raised a decorous uproar. By November 25th, the
noise had reached Cardiff; he was mentioned in an English Society
lecture that night as an incomprehensible. An unjust word.

Mr. Thomas was born in 1914, son of the English master at Swansea
Grammar School, where later he was educated. While at school, he
edited the Magazine. In 1932, having tried journalism and given it
up in disgust, he went to London, where some of his poems were accepted
by the late A. R. Crage. His published books are "Eighteen Poems"
(1934) and "Twenty-five Poems" (1936). He has also had stories
in "The Adelphi."

Mr. Thomas began early. The lyrics that he was writing at
sixteen were orthodox, pleasant and unremarkable, but of this date, too,
were a number of delightful parodies that showed unusual knowledge of
contemporary literary fashions. The growth in his style between
those 1930 verses and the 1934 volume is very remarkable. But let
it be said at the outset that there is nothing freakish, nothing of
the charlatan in this writer's work. The influences we shall notice
here are common to most contemporary poetry, and in virtue of these it
is traditional.
Gerard Hopkins, Wilfred Owen and T. S. Eliot, the three men who have most influenced post-war poetry in England, have all affected Mr. Thomas' growth as a poet. But of course, there has been a transmutation; the colours of their influences have shaded into the background of his mind. When he employs sprung-rhythm, it is not so involved as in Hopkins, and approximates more closely to the rhythm of normal speech. And frequently he prefers the ordinary "syllabically quantitative" metre. (Indeed, for one who has been labelled anti-formalist he seems to hold traditional forms in most unnatural respect. Witness the last ten of the "Twenty-five Poems," where the sonnet sequence seems to have risen, Phoenix-like, from the ashes of post-war poetic experiment dowered with a new and, it may be, a richer shape.) Wilfred Owen's one technical innovation, the half-rime, has been widely used in modern poetry, and this, too, has marked Mr. Thomas's verse. It is harder to judge how far T. S. Eliot has affected his work. The essence of Eliot's poetry is the principle of "emotional sequence," which he substituted for the accepted "logical sequence" and which deriving from the French Symbolists (it may be seen in Valery's well-known "Cimetiere Marin") is paralleled in the psycho-analytical method of "free association" and in certain aspects of film-technique. It seems in Mr. Thomas's poetry to have fused with the methods of the surrealists, who are by far the greatest influence in his work. (The poems of their English champion, Mr. David Gascoyne, bear a noticeable affinity of those of Mr. Thomas). It is their method which he largely uses, but he does not, as Joyce does in the surrealist prose of "Work in Progress," carry it to its furthestmost edge, creating baffling new words, and syntax is less liable to dislocation at his hands. One might even suggest that his poems are made by the subconscious mind and moulded by the conscious. In this respect it is notable that in his poetry phallic symbolism assumes not a psychological significance, as in Freud, but a cosmic.

The surrealist method is to blame for much of the obscurity of present-day verse, for in its processes the poet often uses words of which he alone knows the import and symbols personal to himself, and in extreme cases he may not know the meaning of his own poem for some time after he has written it. Regrettable, too, is the fallacy that free-association is a process poetical in itself. Mr. Desmond McCarthy remarks that some poets, diving into their subconscious, expect applause even if what they bring up is only an old boot or a tin can.

The only other influence that we shall notice here is that of John Donne, with his hardness and his faintly gruesome imagery.

Mr. Thomas' poetry is exciting. There is no watery dilution in it; everything is intense and potent as crystals. The image takes the place of the allegory, and the metaphor that of the simile; and these are bound up with allusion and antithesis in forms of daedal beauty. No vague romantic moods and abstractions: all is tangible and concrete. In this he is almost Shakespearean. These concrete symbols are words which stir subconscious memories, and their
"atmospheres," brought together, produce strange lightning flashes that flicker through the mind, giving the words a new and electrifying implication.

In its content, Mr. Thomas' poetry suggests an offshoot of the state of social despair in which the Great War left Europe, for its words are those of one who has gone in under the shadow of the rock and has seen fear in a handful of dust. This disease of resignationism and frustration which after the war lay like a leprosy throughout the Continent, got its greatest poetic expression in, of course, "The Waste Land." People who have seen the films of "The Petrified Forest" and "Crime Without Passion," will have noticed how a different medium has used the same theme. This negativism was bitterly assailed by D. H. Lawrence in his post-war years, and now the triumvirate Auden, Spender and Lewis have taken up the fight. Auden, the most obvious militant, in the poem beginning

"Sir, no man's enemy, forgiving all,
But will his negative inversion, be prodigal;"

gives the war-song of the new generation, a cry for a renewal of life and faith.

An unexpected echo of this "death-will" may be caught in the work of Mr. T. F. Powys, more especially in "Soliloquies of a Hermit." It is interesting to observe the influence of Mr. Powys in a story by Mr. Thomas called "The Visitor" ("fable" perhaps, rather than "story,"

This arid psychic disease finds expression in several of Mr. Thomas' poems. Here it is complete in three short lines:

Under the skysigns they who have no arms
Have cleanest hands, and, as the heartless ghost
Alone's unhurt, so the blind man sees best.

And again in a very lovely poem he has expressed the morbid fear that paralyses human contacts and lames action ("will's negative inversion"). It begins:

Ears in the turrets hear
Hands grumble on the door.

Mr. Thomas' reaction to this negativism is sharply distinct from that of the Auden-Spender school, whose function is close to that of the physician. He is nearer to philosophy, pushing aside the leaves and branches of civilization and thrusting at the root. The poetry for Wilfred Owen was in the pity. The poetry for Mr. Thomas is in the mystery. In "Ulysses" there are several references to the contemplation of the navel, the mystic meditation of Gantama beneath the Bo. Joyce has influenced both in style, with his surrealism, and in thought with his ascetic hatred of the body and his continual preoccupation with the meaning of things, and also the logos stands immensely important in the mind and art of each. This Eastern meditation on
the "fabulous curtain" is characteristic with Mr. Thomas. The mystery of life and of the universe is the magnetic mountain, the central force of his poetry.

Why east wind chills and south wind cools
    Shall not be known till windwell dries
And west's no longer drowned,
In winds that bring the fruit and rind
Of many a hundred falls.

and

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.

And so his verse becomes at once cosmic and elemental, bound up in the eternal facts and everlasting arcana of birth and death, light and darkness, heat and cold, and especially of growth and decay. His poetry is heavy with awareness of the recondite and labyrinthine "process in the weather of the world" that 'turns ghost to ghost.' Blake, in the grain of sand, and Wordsworth in the meanest flower, saw eternity and the whole universe. Mr. Thomas, in a kind of obsession with Time, watches as if entranced the movements of some trifling thing or an insignificant motion of the body, and sees in them events of universal magnitude. These actions become symbols of the cosmos.

I have heard many years of telling.
And many years should see some change.
The ball I threw while playing in the park
Has not yet reached the ground.

And again:

The hand that whirls the water in the pool
Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind
Hauls my shroud sail.

The only thing of which Mr. Thomas is sure, which he dares assert in his poetry, is mutation in eternity. ('And death shall have no dominion,')

The Yogist deliberation naturally involved the enigma of good and evil. This is the theme of a dream-phantasy in which the poet's mind is moved by a train of all the symbols and sub-conscious memories linked with the idea. Here is the first stanza:
Incarnate devil in a talking snake,  
The central plains of Asia in his garden  
In shaping time the circle stung awake,  
In shapes of sin forked out the bearded apple,  
And God walked there who was a fiddling warden,  
And played down pardon from the heaven's hill.

In all these poems there appears very little emotion; this intellectual, almost scientific atmosphere, is characteristic of much modern poetry.

As I have tried to indicate, Mr. Thomas should not be hastily damned as the type of modern who admires the new merely for its virtue of novelty, and scorns the old because it is old. His subjects are traditional and his diction almost conventional. The sole trouble is that the intensity of the poetic process within him has produced a homologue in the concentration of his verse, which makes some of it obscure. But to condemn the whole for the fault of the part is patently unjust. All is not as clear as day in Browning's poetry; nor yet in Blake's.

It is not quite by the way to notice here that Blake has been claimed as an anticipator of the surrealist method.

It may comfort the person who approaches modern poetry warily to know that Mr. Thomas has admitted that he does not himself understand all he has written. A confession that will appear damaging only to the short-sighted.

Stanley Jones.

Among the publications received for review was a sedately-covered edition of one Dylan Thomas's poems, entitled briefly "Twenty-five Poems." A review was attempted by at least half-a-dozen people, not one of whom succeeded, either in completely understanding the poems, or in as completely misunderstanding them. A state of critical deadlock ensued, miraculously dispelled by this unsolicited and capable elucidation of what was regarded as the latest literary mystery. It is offered to Mr. Thomas and to the publishers, Messrs. Dent and Co., instead of a pithy critique. - ed.
Archibald MacLeish's latest verse encourages a comparison with the poetry of Cecil Day Lewis, for its themes are two - love and politics (or, more widely, social issues). But Public Speech is only superficially in the pattern of From Feathers to Iron, for there is a marked difference in the attitudes of these writers - perhaps arising from their nationalities - in their approach to the political dilemma; the American's awareness of the injustices and oppressions suffered by the masses leads him to the liberal rather than to the marxist position; where Lewis proposes a change in material conditions and a reorganisation of society, MacLeish regrets the lapse of liberty.

Liberty of man and mind
That once was mind's necessity,

and, with the fervour of the nineteenth century English liberal or the twentieth century American democrat, raises a paean to brotherhood, calling upon the crowd to tell itself the world is its to take.

This superficial identification with contemporary interests and the more real reminiscence of the familiar liberal theme makes for easier reading; and the simplicity of the subject matter is paralleled by the simplicity of the writing. Some care has gone to the making of Public Speech; the verse forms are varied, and the rime schemes complicated and not over-obtrusive; but this is not concentrated, packed, allusive poetry; it is lavish, somewhat desultory, repetitive verse, in the vocabulary and, often, the rhythm of popular speech.

Dylan Thomas does not permit the same easy identification with the more familiar tendencies in contemporary or near-contemporary verse, and any interpretation of his work lacks the useful direction afforded by a tradition, unless a comparison with the Elizabethan and Jacobean poets is undertaken. For he is much concerned, as also were Nash, Donne, Webster and Tourneur, with the theme of growth and decay, love and death, and the pressure of time; in at least one of these poems he recalls the mad girl, Tom o' Bedlam catches; and in many the mixture of fiery passion and sustained and considerable religious sense suggest the seventeenth century; but above all the comparison holds in his delight in words, in the blown word, in his mastery over line and verse, his power to draw many meanings into one word, his consummate control of metaphor.

But these comparisons serve rather more as a measure of his qualities than as a guide to his meaning. Thomas is a very personal, very individual poet, and the significance of many of his images, their purpose in each context, will be revealed only with the publication of more work; at present many have an obfuscatory
brilliance; the appropriateness to his major theme, growth and decay, of the symbols,

... selected from the years!
Slow rounding of four seasons' coasts

is clear enough, but in the following passage

Love's reflection of the mushroom features,
Stills snapped by night in the broad-sided field,
Once close-up smiling in the wall of pictures,
Arklamped thrown back upon the cutting flood.

the ingenious command of the cinematic and photographic metaphor, the shock of the pun (ark-lamped and flood; arc-lamps and floodlight), is more obvious than its relation to the passage in which it appears. And yet, this is not to doubt that there is an adequate relation in all the instances which at present are so puzzling; the integrity of the metaphors themselves and the lucidity of the simpler poems in this collection are evidence that this is more than romantic bluff. Meanwhile these half-intelligible poems, with their verbal dazzle and song, make better reading than many more dully intelligible verses.

These books are cheap in price and attractive in format; they should serve excellently as an introduction to two poets worth knowing.

Wales, II (August 1937), 74.

DYLAN THOMAS

To see the world through another man's spectacles is the task of this book's reader, for not only does Mr. Dylan Thomas express himself in symbolism as esoteric as the Hebrew Qaballah, but he colours these visions with the highly individual light of his own imaginative processes.

How far the poet is justified in thus inventing a new language or media of expression is perhaps determined by the success of the media as a conveyer; if this be not so every poet is an individual singer walled up in the excreta of his own unbridled fancy. The richer products of his imagination roar away in unrestricted flood-torrents and leave only chirpings and scrapings of intelligibility.
An extreme complexity or originality demands, obviously, a highly complex or original mode of expression, but where this serves only for an ornament, or for a bait, or for an inducement to the reader to consider the poet who uses a complex medium to describe simple things as a highly original artist with something recondite to say its use is unjustifiable.

The inevitable disappointment of the man who learns a new language only to find that it expresses even less than the old, is perfectly reasonable.

The success of James Joyce's works shows that an esoteric masterpiece will not lack appreciation. Here is a limited number of people having achieved Joyce's ideology make a discovery and persuade others to make the effort. And one would not disdain effort, appreciation is seldom acquired without it, but the results must be worth the trouble.

Whether Mr. Thomas' poetry is worth the trouble must remain undecided for the present. Mr. Thomas has not necessarily arrived at any maturity nor even at the fluent use of his new language. A recurrence of certain word-ganglia, "the long world's gentlemen," "the long world's woman," etc., indicate a greater reliance on the echo of sound association than the more rational association of ideas.

Sound-association is a prop that tumbles out easily though disguised as a genuine associated idea; it needs to make impressive but mechanically-rumbling metre imposing until examined for other significance.

There is a great danger of this occurring in the latter part of poems written in the manner of Mr. Thomas. The first flush of inspiration occurs easily enough,

"Hold hard those ancient minutes in the cuckoo's mouth,"

expresses a great deal more of the philosophy of time than is to be found in pages of Mr. Dunne's works.

"And now the horns of England in the sound of shape"

is less inspired and typically Sitwellian image-confusion.

Incidentally, this is perhaps one of the most meaning-changed poems in the whole book,

"Crack like a spring in vice, bone-breaking April"

is an interpretation of spring's bursting buds with a new twist.

This poem and the first and last in the book hold more "material" than whole volumes of some modern poetry. The material is often raw and unshaped in spite of the poet's heroic efforts at rough hewing,
but that it is there at all is more important than its immediate coherence. Surely Mr. Thomas will hack some giant figure out of his boulder?

The Twenty Five poems are perhaps only a strengthening exercise of less importance in themselves than in their indications. But this does not lessen their importance as a portent.

Nigel Heseltine.
REPETITION OF METRICAL PATTERNS IN EIGHTEEN
POEMS AND TWENTY-FIVE POEMS

In this table, the columns represent the following:

(a) Title of poem,
(b) Number of occurrences of the pattern x / x x x / at the end of lines.
(c) Number of occurrences of the pattern / x x / x / at the beginning of lines.
(d) Total number of lines in the poem.

A. EIGHTEEN POEMS

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<td>13</td>
<td>54</td>
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<tr>
<td>When once the twilight locks no longer</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>42</td>
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<tr>
<td>A process in the weather of the heart</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Before I knocked</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>The force that drives the green fuse</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>My hero bares his nerves</td>
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<td>Where once the waters of your face</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>If I were tickled by the rub of love</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>Our eunuch dreams</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>42</td>
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<td>Especially when the October wind</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>32</td>
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<td>When, like a running grave</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>From love's first fever to her plague</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>50</td>
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<td>In the beginning</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
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<td>Light breaks where no sun shines</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>I fellowed sleep</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>I dreamed my genesis</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>My world is pyramid</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>54</td>
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<tr>
<td>All all and all the dry world's lever</td>
<td>-</td>
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Totals: 146 120 665
Then was my neophyte

Altarwise by owl-light

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<td>I, in my intricate image</td>
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<td>This bread I break</td>
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<tr>
<td>Incarnate devil</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>Today, this insect</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>The seed-at-zero</td>
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<td>Shall gods be said to thump the clouds</td>
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<td>Here in this spring</td>
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<td>Do you not father me</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Out of the sighs</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>Hold hard, these ancient minutes in the cuckoo's month</td>
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<td>Was there a time</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Why east wind chills</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>A grief ago</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
<td>How soon the servant sun</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>34</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bars in the turrets hear</td>
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<td>Foster the light</td>
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<td>The hand that signed the paper</td>
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<td>Should lanterns shine</td>
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<tr>
<td>I have longed to move away</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Find meat on bones</td>
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<td>Grief thief of time</td>
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<tr>
<td>And death shall have no dominion</td>
<td>-</td>
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TABLE OF METRICAL REPETITIONS IN CHRONOLOGICAL ORDER OF THE COMPOSITION OF THE POEM

The columns in the table show the following details:

(a) Title of poem.
(b) Volume in which poem appeared.
(c) Date of version of Notebooks.
(d) Proportion of lines for every line ending in /x/x/x/.
(e) Proportion of lines for every line beginning in /x/x/x/.

Today, this insect 25P 18 Dec 30 13 6.5
Out of the sighs 25P 7 Jun 32 - 9.6
I have longed to move away 25P 1 Mar 33 10 -
And death shall have no dominion 25P Apr 33 - 9
Incarnate devil 25P 16 May 33 9 6
Why east wind chills 25P 1 Jul 33 5.2 6.5
Here in this spring 25P 9 Jul 33 6 9
Find meat on bones 25P 15 Jul 33 10.2 -
Hara in the turrets hear 25P 17 Jul 33 33 8.2
The hand that signed the paper 25P 17 Aug 33 - 5.3
Grief thief of time 25P 26 Aug 33 28 14
Before I knocked 18P 6 Sep 33 13.3 13.3
My hero bares his nerves 18P 17 Sep 33 - 5
In the beginning 18P 18 Sep 33 2.7 10
The force that through the green fuse 18P 12 Oct 33 11 11
From love’s first fever 18P 17 Oct 33 8.3 5.5
When once the twilight 18P 11 Nov 33 3 10.5
Light breaks where no sun shines 18P 20 Nov 33 6 30
I followed sleep 18P 27 Nov 33 3.3 6
A process in the weather of the heart 18P 2 Feb 34 3.4 6
Our eunuch dreams 18P 1 Mar 34 2.4 7
Where once the waters of your face 18P 18 Mar 34 6 3.4
If I were tickled by the rub of love 18P 30 Apr 34 2.6 8.1
I see the boys of summer 18P 1 Apr 34 3.6 4.1

When, like a running grave 18P 5.5 3.6
I dreamed my genesis 18P 5.1 2.4
My world is pyramid 18P 3.6 4.9
All all and all 18P 2.4 6
I in my intricate image 25P 54 5
Hold hard, these ancient minutes 25P - 3
Now 25P 6 -
A grief ago 25P 10 20
How soon the servant sun 25P 5.6 34
Should lanterns shine 25P 6.3 6.3
Then was my neophyte 25P - 4.4
Altarwise by owl-light 25P 17.5 5.4

(The poems below the line do not appear in the Notebooks, and are listed in their order of appearance in the appropriate volume.)
The first part of the bibliography is arranged alphabetically by the title of periodical or newspaper, and under each title, the entries are given chronologically. It is intended to include articles and reviews about Dylan Thomas from 1934 to 1966, giving (i) all those referred to in the text of the thesis, and (ii) as complete a list as I could compile from available sources of articles published in Britain, the United States and elsewhere. I have mainly, though not exclusively, worked from references found through the National Library of Scotland and other local sources, but have additionally made use of copies of review distribution lists of the volumes of poetry published by Messrs. J. M. Dent & Sons, Thomas's British publishers since Twenty-five Poems.

Although this bibliography was never intended to be exhaustive, it was undertaken as a useful adjunct to the main intention of the thesis at a time when there was no available bibliography of any size. There has been published, however, *Dylan Thomas in Print: A Bibliographical History* (Pittsburgh, 1970) by R. N. Maud, a study which could be regarded as the fruit of some seventeen or more years of work on Dylan Thomas by the author. This work is in many ways more comprehensive than the present bibliography and were I preparing this thesis for publication, I would have to modify the bibliography to a list of works referred to in the text. Although I have compared my own entries for each periodical with his, I have not added any entirely new entries to my own simply by taking them from his work,
and so this bibliography represents work carried out quite independently of Maud.

The second part of the bibliography is intended to include books about Dylan Thomas up to the present date and a select list of books which include some discussion of his work. It is arranged alphabetically by author. The index lists alphabetically the authors whose articles are referred to in the text, and gives a reference to the appropriate periodical entry in the bibliography, and the page number of the text where it is mentioned.
### ABBREVIATIONS & CONTRACTIONS

#### A. Works by Dylan Thomas

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<tr>
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<th>Title</th>
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<td>The Map of Love.</td>
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<td>The World I Breathe.</td>
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<td>Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog.</td>
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<td>Deaths and Entrances.</td>
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<td>In Country Sleep.</td>
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<td>DD</td>
<td>The Doctor and the Devils.</td>
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<td>UMM</td>
<td>Under Milk Wood.</td>
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<tr>
<td>QEM</td>
<td>Quite Early one Morning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>AST</td>
<td>Adventures in the Skin Trade.</td>
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<tr>
<td>APS</td>
<td>A prospect of the Sea.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Beach</td>
<td>The Beach of Falesa.</td>
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#### B. Works about Dylan Thomas

- **Ackerman, Aneirin Talfan Davies**
  - J. Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Work*
  - Ansirin Talfan Davies, *Dylan: Druid of the Broken Body*.
- **Brinnin, John Malcolm**
  - John Malcolm Brinnin, *Dylan Thomas in America*.
- **Heppenstall, Rayner**
  - Rayner Heppenstall, *Four Absentees*.
- **Holbrook, David**
  - David Holbrook, *Maregrub Re-visited*.
- **Jones, T. H.**
  - T. H. Jones, *Dylan Thomas*.
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Leonard Clark

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