

Dylan Thomas: The Vision of Death as a Prologue to a New Life

دُلن توماس: رؤىة الموت كبدايه لحياة جديده

Nadia Ali Ismael

ناديه علي اسماعيل

Abstract

Dylan Thomas (1914-1953) is a modern poet belongs to the apocalyptic movement of the 1940's. This movement is influenced by the doctrines and techniques of surrealism.

Poetry for him should not be primarily concerned with man in society, but with the celebration of spiritual truth. It should bring to light the hidden causes, hence his personal interest is to strip darkness and explore the inward motives. To do this he uses a cluster of images: a constant building up and breaking down of images. His poetry depends on the romantic spontaneity, suggestiveness of the Symbolists and the surrealists' mysterious liberation of the unconsciousness and the emotional involvement in the dynamics of life.

In "Light Breaks Where No Sun Shine" (1934) Thomas celebrates a rejection of the idea of death. Man lives eternally in the forms of nature. Thus death bears with it a sense of entrance rather than exit. In the "winter's Tale" death is the resurrection, a necessary step for the physical and spiritual regeneration.

Dylan Thomas (1914- 1953) came from the rural Swansea in Wales, bohemianism, alcoholism and freakiness made him the controversial topic in London's literary circles; generally he is regarded as an eccentric.

Thomas belongs to the Apocalyptic movement of the 1940's which includes George Barker, Vernon Watkins and Kathleen Raine. This movement is influenced by the doctrines and techniques of surrealism. Poetry for them should not be primarily concerned with man in society, but with the celebration of spiritual truth. They also have romantic tendencies with view of the world, using myths and symbols from a wide variety of sources.

Thomas is obsessed with words, he is aware of the capacity of words to reflect reality and render the inner thoughts and insights. He says:

What I like to do is to treat words as a craftsman does his wood or stone ...to carve, mould,... polish and plane theme into patterns, sequences.¹

Such obsession is linked with his attempt to write within the romantic tradition. Like them he turns his eyes toward the inner depths of imagination. Both agree upon spontaneity as the utmost principle. But his attempt to bring language to perform a more active role marks the main difference between him and the romantics.² Unlike the romantics he tries to get at the mystery of his own growth and being by his use of highly personal idioms and image clusters.³

The other source for Thomas's expressive tendency is borrowed from the surrealists. The surrealists agree upon damaging the conventional forms of language to employ a non-literary way which helps the liberation of the unconscious. Hence their language is free from any logical control through automatic writing.⁴ In Thomas's view such automatic writing is "worthless as literature."⁵ It is nothing but "chaos"

which the surrealists take as "the shape and order"⁶ it is true that the poet's images are intensive and mysterious which are surrealistic features, but beyond that there is full control over verbal texture.

French symbolists enriched his experience, especially in their suggestiveness and rejection of the romantic ideal of full identification of poetry with inner emotions. Furthermore, Thomas was enthusiastic for the way imagists structured their images to let the meaning flow unstated from the space between them. But he objected to their use of common speech and their concern for the object itself. With him the thing loses its objectivity and swamps in an intricate net of connotations.

The free expression and use of a host of images are part of the influence of Futurism on him. As a result his poetry is turned to be pictorial or what is called "concrete poetry."⁷ Also the sense of revolt, especially against death and the emotional involvement in the dynamics of life mark his futurist style. Add to this his rejection of the past represented in his denial of any Welsh influence on his poetry. But the Welsh religious tradition is reflected in his Biblical imagery.

Against such rich background Thomas's poetry developed its ideal. In a broadcast script he states explicitly the specific role of poetry:

A good poem is a contribution to reality. The world is never the same once a good poem has been added to it. A good Poem helps to change the shape and significance of the universe, helps to extend everyone's knowledge of himself and the world around him.⁸

It is the reality as his experience or response to it shapes it. It is important to remember that Thomas grew in an atmosphere of war (which he opposed on principle), besides, industrial ugliness and mass unemployment were familiar sights. The series of events that cracked that world fed him with agonies, yet he did not involve himself directly. Basically he is concerned with the wearisome condition of humanity "man be my metaphor", Thomas says.⁹

Thomas reflects on reality in his particular vision. His emphasis is on the physical concept of human energy. That is, the idea is translated in terms of body and cosmos. It is the "continuous realm" in which the tangible (physical) is merged with the intangible (conscious).¹⁰ Such vision is enriched with a host of images which creates what the poet loves most. "The multitudinous world."¹¹ This is exactly what makes his poetry obscure and difficult in an individual way. It is turned to be as "a secret code" which needs to be deciphered."¹²

In "Light Breaks where no Sun Shines" (1934), Thomas describes his spiritual response to the world around him. His concern for man is seen as he records his inner struggle from spiritual darkness towards some measure of light.

Darkness constitutes an important aspect in the poem. For him it implies death which comes from the "moment of perception."¹³ That is, when he becomes well aware of the world which he lives in, he starts to realize its "horrors and hells"¹⁴ This turns the world into a nightmare from which he could never completely recover. The darkness he sees is the "Night in the sockets rounds .../The limit of the globes." (ll 19-20).¹⁵ This darkness is represented in the stupidities of society around him which imprison people and limit the universe which is free for Thomas. This "night" includes all aspects of life (especially war) which he has to reject because he cannot cope with them. Hence he erects barriers of drink, anti-social behaviour to be the defense against the brutal fact of life.

The darkness of the "night" is transformed in the poet's mind to the natural world. It is affected by the same force, a continual process. The "winters' robes" hold the universe. It is a power of destruction accompanied by "skinning gales", a violent force implies a gesture of control, an image of victimization. In other words, it is the bitter cold that settles into the centers of his brain and pushes out the emotional warmth that once nourished him.

On the other side, he creates an opposite atmosphere, the informing sense of light. The triumph of the rite which is life. Light is seen deep in the spirit which is the "windy blood" that circulates as the sea round the globe.¹⁶ He emphasizes the sense of life and struggle as he uses the sea, the primary source of humanity, the source from which all life is taken to have emerged:

Dawn breaks behind the eyes;
From poles of skull and toe the windy blood
Slides like a sea....

(ll. 13-15)

The sense of light is also embodied in "spring" which continues the analogy of human life to the span of a year. Thomas sees the warmth that will melt the glaciers that are carving deep dark crevices in his psyche. The light of hope is the "candle" that warms both "seed" and "youth". The poet implies the idea of "to contain, to be full of" in the image of the "seed".¹⁷ It is the embryo which signifies birth, the beginning of life. The embryo, a state of absolute innocence and grace is involved in the process of time, particularly old age and death,

Thomas continues the process of life to end it with death. In death "logics die" and man's only life is the life that his body shares with nature. In death the "dawn" of consciousness remains. The light of understanding, a sense of illumination breaks in man's head, not in the external universe:

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

(ll.25-30)

Thomas envisions the dead returning into the organic cycle, expressing no animosity that many of us feel toward the prospect of our inevitable extinction. In death man continues the cycle. He grows in the dark earth as he grows in the darkness of the womb. He dies to live, to contribute to the image of resurrection, a sign of the soul's immortality. This is the consolation that Thomas offers, an image of being gathered into the earth, embraced by mother earth and becomes a body of earth with flesh of grain and veins of water.

To conclude, the poem's special poignancy derives from the tensions of opposites. The merging images of light and darkness, life and death, illustrate the basic trope of the poem. This merging of opposites intensifies the irony of process. The man who acts is also the man who dies, a reinforcement of the confusion between actor and victim.

Thomas is evoking the frustration of being, the shaping influence of a confused milieu. No longer does life seem so hard to live when compared to not being able to be alive at all. The poet's intense and bitter realization of mortality concludes with his hope and confidence in the day of resurrection. Hence the poem celebrates a rejection of the idea of death. Man lives eternally in the forms of nature, performing the traditional function of consolation. He is hidden

in the dark earth, bears the secret of eternal life. Death bears with it a sense of entrance rather than exit. A sense of completion as one lives with his parents, the first dead, Adam and Eve. The dead are never truly dead but are part of the generative nature. Death comes to free him from the deep dark freeze that keeps pulling him down. He realizes that he is deeper and wiser as he becomes entangled in his own shroud, the soil.

Thomas insistence on spiritual and physical rebirth is emphasized in "A Winter's Tale". He draws a cyclic framework for his poem depending on two main images "snow and fire. The experience begins with death, rebirth, to end with a final regeneration.

The poem begins with an atmosphere of death: the "snow" covers nature with the "stars falling cold" and the "far owl warning among the folds." It is a projection of the hero's death in life as he seeks physical gratification. The picture is intensified leaving no sign of warmth and life.

And the stars falling cold,
And the smell of hay in the snow, and the far owl
Warning among the folds, and the frozen hold
Flocked with the sheep white smoke of the farm house cowl
In the river wended vales where the tale told

(ll.6-10)

The successive stage of his experience continues as the poet introduces the image of fire. It indicates his false regeneration – physical because "The scrolls of fire that burnt in his heart and head "(l, 14) is a reflection of his "burning" desire which is unfulfilled. Hence the fire is surrounded by the coldness of the snow , "his firelit island ringed by the winged snow"(l.17). Thus he remains "torn" and alone in a farm house where the "roots" of his frustrated desire remain "sleeping chill."

Of field. And burning then
In his firelit island ringed by the winged snow
And the dung hills white as wool and the hen
Roosts sleeping chill till the flame of the cock crow
Combs through the mantled yards and the morning men

(II.16-20)

This stage is purely physical regeneration to be followed by another one of death (a necessary step in his journey), the merging of fire and snow will pave the way to the ultimate resurrection. Here the hero with his "entrapped need" gives vent to his "hunger go howling" by weeping from the "crest of grief" kneeling on the "cold stones" and praying to the "veiled sky" in the "house of prayers." Accordingly he will practise sexual deprivation, the "dying flesh" as a step towards the final rebirth. He realizes that the obsession with sexual "bind love" is behind his spiritual paralysis, the "cloud of snow" that veils the sky the joy beyond." Under an acute painful suffering resulting from unfulfilled desire, he wishes to be pure and protected in the "womb"

The rivers mouthed in light,
And drown in the drifts of his need, and curled caught
In the always desiring centre of the white
In human cradle and the bride bed for ever sought
By the believer lost and the hurled outcast of light.

(II.46-50)

But such state of physical paralysis cannot be reached unless he descends to gratify the physical "fire" hence the longing for the sensuality of the "bride bed".

At this moment the "Winter's Tale" is sung by singers in different villages. The song has an effect over nature: it awakens the "nightingale", I n "the buried wood ",

Listen. The minstrels sing
In the departed villages. The nightingale,
Dust in the buried wood, flies I the grains of her wings
And spells on the winds of the dead his winter's tale.
The voice of the dust of water from the withered spring

(II.60-66)

All the world enjoys man's pursuit for the ideal."¹⁸ This song paves the way for a revitalizing image of the she-bird ,the "burning bride," the "dawned." Thus nature finds its redemption in the prayer and the bird.¹⁹

In Welsh culture , the mid –winter rite praises a goddess who is presented as a bird , a symbol of welsh rebirth.²⁰ With the introduction of the she-bird, the snow turns to be a symbol of purity rather than coldness. Furthermore, the she-bird is turned into a "mystical bride" which grants nature harmony: in her rise "the dancers move / On the departed, snow bushed green, wanton in moon light"(II.71-72); the falling stars are replaced by the planted stars and "The dead oak walks for love"(I.75). This change indicates nature's response to the restorative power of the a- wakened bird.

The sky, the bird, the bride,
The cloud, the need, the planed stars, the joy beyond
The fields of seed and the time dying flesh astride,
The heavens, the heaven, the grave, the burning font.
In the far ago land the door of his drath glided wide,

(II.100-105)

The newly awakened bird with its "wild wings" is the means by which man is to be from the citadel of isolation. Besides, its "soft- feathered voice" suggests the possibility of a positive communication. The man who "knelt alone in the cup of the vales" follows the she-bird like "a scare-crow of snow", finding in her his salvation. The union between the deity-bird and the hero takes place as the bird descends to him. The final stage in his journey with the "burning in the bride bed of love" is characterized by its sensuality, yet Thomas modifies it "in the folds of paradise "where "she rose with him flowering in her melting snow "(ll.127, 130). This immersion is "a prologue to a new life "²¹

"A Winter's Tale" signifies the continuity of the successive stages of the experience. It is a tale of physical and spiritual regeneration. Taking the myth as a basis for the tale, Thomas succeeds in exploring his hero's naked desires as he awakens from the "cloud of snow" to the "burning bride", represented by the she-bird, thus mixing sex with mysticism. This journey is full of paradoxical images of snow and fire; winter and spring; sensual and spiritual. It is through suffering that the new creation reaches a sense of joy.

To sum up, in "light Breaks where no sun shines" and "A- Winter's Tale" Dylan Thomas isolates himself from a direct imitation of external realities, a mode dominant in his age. His main concern is to dwell in the inner depths of his experience. Poetry for him should bring to light the hidden causes, hence his personal interest to strip darkness and explore the inward motives. To do this he does not use one central image but a cluster of images: a constant building up and breaking down of images. Thomas was able to do this by relying on a rich background of various trends through which his ideals passed serious modifications. He worked with the romantic expressive spontaneity; the suggestiveness of the Symbolists; the Surrealists' mysterious liberation of the unconscious; and the emotional involvement in the dynamics of life which is part of the Futurist style. His revolt against death in the "light Breaks where no Sun Shines" finding a sense of completion in the immortality of the soul after physical death. And in "A winter's Tale", it is the resurrection which is emphasized, taking death as a necessary step for the regeneration. Finally, with the help of all these movements and tendencies Thomas succeeds in shaping his poetry to be a product of a highly conscious craftsman, as he always aspired and struggled to be.

Notes

¹Quoted in John Sculley ,ed. Modern Poetics (New York:McGraw- Hill Book company,2000),p.187

²Among the romantics he admired was Shelley :to "quote Shelley ,yes,"he says. This means that his attitude to the romantics exceeds themes to be linguistic. See Constantine FitzGibbon,ed. Selected Letters of Dylan ThomasLondon:J.M.Dent of Son's Ltd, 1966),p.24.

³C.B.Cox,ed. Dylan Thomas (Englewood Cliffs: prentice- Hall inc,1983),p.146.

⁴PaulC.Ray, The Surrealist Movement in England (Ithaca and London :Cornell University press , 1988),p.45.

⁵Fitz Gibbon, Selected Letters,p.62.

⁶Sculley ,ModernPoetics,p.190

⁷Futurism is an artistic movement began in 1909 with the publication in the Paris newspaper Le Figaro of a manifesto by the Italian poet and editor FilippoTomaso Marinetti. The movement stresses the future and the new ideas in the arts.It deprecates quiet living and stillness which does not fit the machine age.It worships all aspects of the mechanizes world. It glorifies the technological world and neglects the past and tradition. See A Dictionary of Literary Terms, J. A. Cudden London: Penguin Books, 1992), P. 281.

⁸Quoted in WalfordDavies,ed. Dylan Thomas (Philadelphia:Open University press, 1965),p.24.

⁹Quoted in T.H.Jones. Dylan Thomas (Edinburg: Oliver and Boyd,1970),p.18.

¹⁰Ibid.,pp.115-16.

¹¹Jones, Dylan Thomas, p,104.

¹²See Davies, Dylan Thomas, p.26.

¹³Ibid.,p.16.

¹⁴FitzGibbon, Selected Letters,p.45.

¹⁵All Line references to this poem and the Subsequent one are taken from Alan Bold ed. Cambridge Book of English Verse (Cambridge: Cambridge University press,1977).

¹⁶The sea is arecurrent image in Thomas's poem. It is interesting to mention that the name Dylan comes from a collection of medieval Welsh tales.

¹⁷See Jones, Dylan Thomas ,p.16.

¹⁸Willian T.Moynifan,"Dylan Thomas and the Bildical Rhythm," PMLA,LXXIX,No.(December (1964),64.

¹⁹Ibid

²⁰W.S.Merwin,"Religious poet " in Dylan Thomas: The Legend and the poetryed.E.W.Tedlock (London :Mercury Books,1963),pp.236-37.

²¹Jacob Korg, DylanThomas(NewYork:TwaynePublishers,Inc.,1965),p.14.

Bibliography

Bold ,Alan.ed. Cambridge Book of English Verse.

Cambridge:Cambridge University press,1977.

Cox,C.B.ed. Dylan Thomas. Englewood Cliffs: prentice-

Hall inc., 1983.

Cudden, j.A. A Dictionary of Literary Terms .London:

Penguin Books.1992

Davies, Walford, ed. Dylan Thomas. Philadelphia: Open

University,1965.

FitzGibbon, Constantine,ed. Selected Letters of Dylan

Thomas. London: J.M.Dent& Sons Ltd,1966.

Jones ,T.H. Dylan Thomas. Edinburgh : Oliver And Boyd ,

1970.

Konrg, Jacob. Dylan Thomas. New- York: Twaynepublishers, Inc.,1965.

Moynifan, Willian T. Dylan Thomas and the Biblical Rhythm" PMLA. LXXIX.No.5 (Cecember 1964). 631-47.

Ray , Paul c. The Surrealist Movement in England. Ithaca andLondon: Cornell University press,1988.

Sculley , John,ed. Modern poetics. New York : McGraw – Hill Book Company , 2000.

Ted Lock , E.W.ed. Dylan Thomas : The Legend and the Poet. London: Mercury Books, 1996.

الخلاصة

دلين توماس (1914-1953) شاعر محدث ينتمي الى الحركة التنبؤية لاربعينيات القرن العشرين والتي تأثرت بإسلوب الحركة السريالية.

بالنسبة لتوماس فأن الشعر لا يكون مهتماً بالدرجة الاساسية بعلاقة الانسان بالمجتمع بل بالحقيقة الروحية للانسان. بمعنى ان الشعر يُظهر البواعث الكامنة في داخل الانسان. لأظهار هذا، فأن الشاعر يبني ويهدم بصورة مستمرة مجموعة صور شعرية. يعتمد شعر هذا الشاعر على العفوية والرومانتيكية وإيحاء الحركة الرمزية والتحرر الغامض للعقل الباطن والاندماج الشعوري بحركة الحياة كما يراها السرياليون.

ففي قصيدة " الشمس تشرق في الظلام " (1934) فأن توماس يرفض فكرة الموت لأن الانسان بالنسبة له يعيش مع الطبيعة بصورة ابدية، بهذا فأن الموت يحمل معنى الدخول وليس الخروج من الحياة. وفي "حكاية شتاء" فأن الموت هو البعث، كخطوة ضرورية للولادة الجسدية والروحية.