

DYLAN THOMAS'S *18 POEMS*: A TESTAMENT OF POETIC FAITH

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ABSTRACT

In *18 Poems*, Dylan Thomas's creativity is marked as much as by a search for form as by a fresh exploration of reality. It is the language of assertion, he suggests, that distinguishes him from the fallen poets of thirties who reflect, in their reluctance to commit themselves to any kind of assertion, a loss of faith in an ultimate solution. And it is a measure of Auden's honesty and courage that in his ceaseless exploration of reality and search for salvation, he regards all resolutions and systems that he has arrived at in different poems as tentative and inadequate. Auden's mystery symbolizes at one level the dark void of night, but at another level it represents the intensity of his quest referring to the range of comprehension covering heaven, earth, and underworld that he finally gained and that gave him an exalted position analogous to Eliot's. The failure to order his shifting reactions to a system assumes a special poignancy in Thomas because of his conviction in experiential mode. In *18 Poems* Thomas, while opposing the intellectual trend of Auden's poems, searches earnestly for a system of personal salvation. Thomas Hardy's *Poems for the Present and the Past* and W.B. Yeats's *The Tower and Last Poems* gave Thomas the necessary form and faith to "plan for the present." Thomas's *18 Poems* is remarkable for its rigorous craftsmanship and compression leading to obscurity. So, it may be relevant here to inquire into Thomas's attitude to the established systems—especially in religion and politics—and examine the various attempts he made in evolving a system of his own.

KEYWORDS: Human Will, Prefiguration, Paradox, Mutation, and Togetherness

INTRODUCTION

The close of the first half of 1930's, immediately after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, witnessed a collapse of faith in all accredited systems, and the poets, W.H. Auden, Cecil Day Lewis, Stephen Spender and Louis MacNeice searched for a concept of a stable order as a frame of reference despite their contrary tendencies. "Out of the Future into actual History" (*Look Stranger!* 12). They "speak of" what "they know". Day Lewis confesses:

Now when drowning imagination clutches
At old loves drifting away,
Splintered highlights, hope capsized—a wrecked world's
Flotsam, what can I say
To cheer the abysmal gulfs, the crests that lift not
To any land in sight?
How shall the sea-waif, who lives from surge to surge, chart
Current and reef aright? (*Collected Poems* 220)

To demonstrate and confirm existing imperfection and uncertainty was, as MacNeice observes, the aim of politics, religion, and philosophy:

Time was away and somewhere else,
 There were two glasses and two chairs
 And two people with the one pulse
 (Somebody stopped the moving stairs)... (*Collected Poems* 189)

The Apocalyptic poets felt a compulsive urge to build their own systems of value. Auden observes:

Which cannot see its likeness in their sorrow
 That brought them desperate to the brink of valleys;
 Dreaming of evening walks through learned cities,
 They reined their violent horses on the mountains,
 Those fields like ships to castaways on islands,
 Visions of green to them that craved for water. (*LS* 22)

As individual distinctness was the central focus, “the private world of intuition and metaphysics was more important to the poets of the 1940s than the political and intellectual world of the 1930s. And it is easy to stereotype the period as romantic and irrational; yet part of that irrationality was absorbed into systems of belief” (Shires 34-35).

Auden and MacNeice differ in their approaches and methods of analysis, but both agree that the Apocalyptic poets succeeded in working out their individual pattern and achieving a positive vision. MacNeice finds:

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

Auden describes, “She climbs the European sky; / Churches and power stations lie /Alike among earth’s fixtures...” (*LS* 14). Giving more importance to the inward world, “the Apocalypitics saw themselves as moralists eager both to free the individual from the constraining systems of a mechanistic universe and to exalt him into the ‘godhead’ of his own imagination” (Shires 26).

Dylan Thomas’s creativity is marked as much as by a search for form as by a fresh exploration of reality. Day Lewis redesigns the purpose of Thomas in his own words:

This clay that binds the roots man
 And firmly foots his flying span-
 Only this clay can voice, invest,

Measure and frame our mortal best. (*DCP* 183)

The failure to order his shifting reactions to a system assumes a special poignancy in Thomas because of his conviction in experiential mode, because of "his profound distrust of the intellect." He explains:

We summer boys in this four-winded spinning,
 Green of the seaweed's iron,
 Hold up the noisy sea and drop her birds,
 Pick the world's ball of wave and froth
 To choke the deserts with her tides,
 And comb the country gardens for a wreath. (*Poems* 71)

In *18 Poems* Thomas, while opposing the intellectual trend of Auden's poems, searches earnestly for a system of personal salvation. "He seems to have feared the influence of intellectual upon emotional and sensory experience, and consequently is reluctant to impose too rigorous a cerebral control upon his emotional perceptions and upon his imagery" (Ackerman 43).

However, Auden's contemporaries distrusted systems and dogmas and held incertitude as a value. Auden ascertains:

The earth turns over, our side feels the cold,
 And life sinks choking in the wells of trees;
 The tickling heart comes to a standstill, killed,
 The icing on the pond waits for the boys,
 Among the holly and the gifts I move,
 The carols on the piano, the glowing hearth,
 All our traditional sympathy with birth,
 Put by your challenge to the shifts of love. (*LS* 25)

The paradox is that Auden yet sought to codify his experiences and construct a system of thought. And it is a measure of Auden's honesty and courage that in his ceaseless exploration of reality and search for salvation, he regards all resolutions and systems that he has arrived at in different poems as tentative and inadequate:

Our hunting fathers told the story
 Of the sadness of the creatures,
 Pity'd the limits and the lack
 Set in their finished features;
 Saw in the lion's intolerant look,

Behind the quarry's dying glare,
 Love raging for the personal glory
 That reason's gift would add,
 The liberal appetite and power,
 The rightness of a god. (LS 17)

Auden recognizes this historical urgency when he remarks:

See Scandal praying with her sharp knees up,
 And Virtue stood at Weeping Cross,
 The green thump to the ledger knuckled down,
 And Courage to his leaking ship appointed,
 Slim Truth dismissed without a character,
 And gaga Falsehood highly recommended. (LS 65)

So, Auden faults not Thomas but the environment which failed to provide what the poet needed; the circumstances compelled him to fabricate his own system. He finds:

In the houses
 The little pianos are closed, and a clock strikes.
 And all sway forward on the dangerous flood
 Of history, that never sleeps or dies,
 And, held one moment, burns the hand. (66)

Auden's statement, while touching the centre of the problems that confronted the Apocalyptic poets, reminds the readers of what Eliot's observation on William Blake. The formlessness and the lack of concentration that characterize much of Blake's work because Blake's "genius required ... a framework of accepted and traditional ideas which would have prevented him from indulging in a philosophy of his own, and concentrated his attention upon the problems of the poet" (*The Sacred Wood* 157-58).

Day Lewis holds that Auden misses the positive significance of the urge that prompted the creative writers of the period to search for order in the chaos of experience. He questions Auden's "jig-saw argument":

Do you not see that history's high tension
 Must so be broken down to each man's need
 And his frail filaments, that it may feed
 Not blast all patience, love and warm invention?

On lines beyond your single comprehension

The circuit and full day of power proceed. (189)

To imply, as Auden does, that these personal systems are unsubstantial fabrications is to deny the validity of intensely realized visions. Day Lewis, the suffering contemporary of Auden's, finds a hope for poetry, "an end to this sorry" hound of Auden's influence and volunteers for the influence of Thomas, "memoried and real" to regain what he had lost:

Then shall the mounting stages of oppression

Like mazed and makeshift scaffolding ton down

Reveal his unexampled, best creation—

The shape of man's necessity full grown.

Built from their bone, I see a power-house stand

To warm men's hearts again and light the land. (188)

So, it may be relevant here to inquire into Thomas's attitude to the established systems—especially in religion and politics—and examine the various attempts he made in evolving a system of his own.

DISCUSSIONS

The spectacle of a mortal poet Thomas realizing, through suffering and through the concentrated application of mental faculties, a godlike power of apprehension shows the infinite possibilities of the human mind, and in spite of dark hues the picture is optimistic in its total impression. Thomas illustrates:

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower

Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees

Is my destroyer.

And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose

My youth is bent by the same wintry fever. (127)

In the poem "The Force that Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" the image of "green fuse" is nurtured and cultured by the life giving force, "the fountain head"; the contrary images juxtaposed as "the rocks," "quicksand," "leech," and "crooked worm" suggest the weariness and travail of the pilgrimage. "Emphasis is laid upon the process of creation as a biological creative-destructive continuum, and the subjugation of man to the forces of cosmic destruction is the theme of the opening lines" (Ackerman). The phrases "the girdered nerve," "the creasing flesh," "the scalding veins," the "hole ... in the stitched wound," "second death," "second rise of the skeleton," "the feeding sea," "genesis in sweat of sleep," "genesis ... in the marching heart," and "genesis in sweat of death" (66) as found in the poem "I Dreamed My Genesis" also indicate the consuming nature of the pilgrim's experience. His inward convulsions are projected in external nature: "the syllabic blood," "the vowelled beeches," "the water's speeches," "the hour's word," "the dark-vowelled birds" (53), "the sun and moon shed one white light," "the sun was red, the moon was grey," "the earth and sky were meeting as

two mountains meeting,” “ the noise of wind and sun,” and the “one sun, one manna, warmed and fed” (58). The striving and struggling and the miracle of Thomas having structured the Surrealistic construct and poetic vision—“imposing ... on flux an architectonic”—(*MCP* 181) exemplifies a universal truth as revealed in Thomas Hardy’s *Poems for the Present and the Past* and W.B. Yeats’s *The Tower and Last Poems*, and the truth is both terrifying and assuring.

The terror and the exultation attendant on the new discovery are conveyed in the poem, “Light breaks where no sun shines”:

Light breaks where no sun shines;
Where no sea runs, the waters of the heart
Push in their tides;
And, broken ghosts with glowworms in their heads,
The things of light
File through the flesh where no flesh decks the bones. (94)

It is the language of assertion, Thomas suggests in *18 Poems*, that distinguishes him from the fallen poets who reflect, in their reluctance to commit themselves to any kind of assertion, a loss of faith in an ultimate solution.

In the poems “I Dreamed My Genesis,” “I Followed Sleep,” and “In the Beginning,” the Auden-figure may have come into Thomas’s mind from his reading of Auden’s early poems, “The Carter’s Funeral” and “Allendale”. In “The Carter’s Funeral,” Auden reflects on the limits of human understanding:

Little enough stays musing upon
The passing of one of the masters of things,
Only a bird looks peak-faced on,
Looks and sings. (*New Verse* 5)

In “Allendale,” on the other hand, knowledge increases pain and doubt. This pain is born of involvement of a gnawing self-consciousness that associates death with horror. Auden complains:

The chimney still stands at the top of the hill like a finger
Skywardly pointing as if it were asking: ‘What lies there?’
And thither we stray to dream of those things as we linger,
Nature denies here. (*New Verse*)

The human will is infirm and is easily overwhelmed by thoughts of decay and death; this lack of self- possession is sharply contrasted with the steadiness and sanity of the judge in the infernal regions. Auden maintains:

So under it stand we, all swept by the rain and the wind there,
Muttering: ‘What look you for, creatures that die in a season?’

We care not, but turn to our dreams and the comfort we find there,
Asking no reason. (*New Verse*)

These juvenile poems represent Auden not merely the type of the discriminating judge, as MacNeice points out, but also the type of the human mind that remains unaffected even in the presence of death:

The neutral island facing the Atlantic,
The neutral island in the heart of man,
Are bitterly soft reminders of the beginnings
That ended before the end began. (224)

If man could attain to this Auden-height, he could apprehend the real of beauty free from the "death's feather". But the question mark raised in the first line of the last stanza of Thomas's poem "My World is Pyramid" points to the impossibility of attaining to this level of perception. There is, however, an added realization that there is a higher mode of knowledge the attainment of which liberates the mind from pain and death:

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 a hair,
How light the sleeping on this soily star,
How deep the waking in the worlded clouds. (*Poems*)

Auden's pursuit of knowledge is, thus, constantly attended with a sense of pain, and his mind is even denied the relish of fleeting sensory pleasures. MacNeice comments:

He is not creative at all, his mind is dry
And bears no blossoms even in the season,
Whose hobby is giving everyone else the lie. (232)

Auden's preoccupation with thoughts of honouring "founders of these starving cities" and "the image of our sorrow," of the redeeming process results in a failure to respond to beauty, and Auden recognizes his own weakness:

It is the sorrow; shall it melt? Ah! Water
Would gush, flush, green these mountains and these valleys,
And we rebuild our cities, not dream of islands. (*LS 23*)

Thomas attempts to recall those aspects of Auden which transcend his mortal nature:

Who blows death's feather? What glory is colour?
I blow the stammel feather in the vein,

The loin is glory in a working pallor,
 My clay unsuckled and my salt unborn,
 The secret child, I sift about the sea
 Dry in the half-tracked thigh. (99)

But standing beside the immortal spirit of Auden, he can only reflect on the tragic destiny of the grievous poets, and of his own:

What colour is glory? Death's feather? Tremble
 The halves that pierce the pin's point in the air,
 And prick the thumb-srained heaven through the thimble.
 The ghost is dumb that stammered in the straw,
 The ghost that hatched his havoc as he flew
 Blinds their cloud –tracking eye. (*Poems*)

However, Thomas's response to Auden's *Poems* (1928) was not unmixed and the excitement was accompanied by anxiety and doubt.

Thomas's comment on Auden's mystery of his benumbing happiness at the moment of utmost misery and despair is relevant here. He addresses Auden as "grave":

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. (*Poems*)

Auden's mystery symbolizes at one level the dark void of night, but at another level it represents the intensity of his quest referring to the range of comprehension covering heaven, earth, and underworld that he finally gained and that gave him an exalted position analogous to Eliot's.

In the earlier poems, "The Carter's Funeral," "Allendale," "The Rookery" and "The Engine House" Auden's soul looks through the renovated and restored eyes of Walter de la Mare. Thomas comments in the poem "In the Beginning":

In the beginning was the three- pointed star,
 One smile of light across the empty space,
 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. (83)

And in *Poems* (1930), Auden watches the drama of the post-war afflictions from inside as an intellectual soul of Eliot. Thomas states:

In the beginning was the secret brain.
 The brain was celled and soldered in the thought
 Before the pitch was forking to a sun;
 Before the veins were shaking in their sieve,
 Blood shot and scattered to the winds of light
 The ribbed original of love. (*Poems*)

Thomas finds in Auden's journey a prefigurement of his own:

I dreamed my genesis in sweat of death, fallen
 Twice in the feeding sea, grown
 Stale of the Adam's brine until, vision
 Of new man strength, seek the sun. (66)

The poem "When Once the Twilight Locks No Longer" takes the form of a series of questions, and Thomas's failure to elicit any response from Auden reflects both the absence of any dynamic relationship and the limited nature of his own knowledge:

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

Auden's dumbness "the milky acid on each hinge" represents the inscrutability of insentient existence, "the popped pinkthank" and it is imagined as a giant figure sunk in heavy slumber in complete indifference to all living voices and to everything around it.

In the poem "Where Once the Waters of Your Face," the idea extends further, and the "dead" silence of Auden "dry as a tomb" represents the immutable silent rock which, in turn, means the eternity itself, "He had by heart the Christ-cross-row of death."

The evolution of the rock through successive geological stages and its present stance pinpoint the paradox of movement and motionlessness. Thomas presents:

The force that drives the water through the rocks
 Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams
 Turns mine to wax.
 And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins
 How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks. (151)

The rock seems to exist in an eternal stasis without any definable beginning. It was originally embedded under the ocean, but a great convulsive urge raised it above the waters, and its peak touched the clouds and sunbeams. This change suggests growth and movement; but the poet Auden, with his limited vision, cannot visualize the successive stages. The repeated use of “once” reflects his bewilderment and shows that time-divisions have been blurred. Both the beginning and the end--the two eternities--are dead or incomprehensible, and as in the poem “From Love’s Fever to Her Plague” the poet Thomas learns Auden’s ironic language, “the code of night” “to twist the shapes of thoughts ... into the stony idiom of the brain” “from the soft second ... to the hollow minute of the womb”.

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

Passing through mutations the rock emerges as a fixed, permanent symbol of eternal time and eternal space, spanning both the sky and the underworld, both the unfathomed past and the undecipherable future.

Thomas’s reading of Day Lewis’s *Transitional Poem* (1929), Spender’s *Nine Experiments* (1928), and MacNeice’s *Blind Fireworks* (1928) left a profound impact on his mind. Day Lewis’s approach to Auden shows how he confronts and transcends an old dilemma. The urge to return to the capacious atmosphere of earlier poetry, Greek and Roman, was insistent, but his historical sense also made him aware of the new demands on poetry in a vastly altered setting. In *Transitional Poem*, he suggests that the task of contemporary poets is to explore the dark passages with a sharpened insight into the heart and nature of Man:

Yet time trundles this one to the rag-and-bone man,
 While that other may
 Reverbrate all along
 Man’s craggy circumstance—

Naked enough to keep its dignity
 Though it eye God askance. (DCP 19)

A close glance at his poems displays that human mind is his own master and guide, and human brain is his own life. He affirms:

But there is naught surprising
 Can explode the single mind:-
 Let figs from thistles fall
 Or stars from their pedestal
 This architecture will stand. (14)

There are many poems in which Day Lewis as Yeatsian protagonist mocks the dying Godhead, Auden and he denies him any gratitude or sense of reverence:

I care not if he retorts—
 'Of all that labour and wive
 And worship, who would give
 A fiddlestick for these thoughts
 That sluggishly yaw and bend,
 Fat strings of barges drawn
 By a tug they have never seen
 And never will comprehend?' (13-14)

Transitional Poem, thus, presents the mind's agonized search for light on the dark shores, and also its ultimate transcendence. Day Lewis explains the evolution of "the single mind," "a virtue ... made plain ... of passionate cleavage" and its "equilibrium":

A deathless cell designed
 To demonstrate death's act,
 Which, the more surely it moves
 To earth's influence, but proves
 Itself the more intact. (41)

The large canvas of Yeats's poetry is suggested, but the chief focus is on the inner reality. Day Lewis reached the end of his journey of objectivity; but this beatitude is denied to Auden, and it is part of his tragic destiny to grope in a blind Purgatory. But he gains in *Poems* (1930), through Eliot's example, a clearer understanding of his own allotted role in the drama of life.

In Auden's *Poems* (1928) which, in turn, recalls the images of Hardy's poem "Memory and I," the protagonist probes his memory about the nature of his contemporaries's youth, joy, hope and love, and doubts about an Yeatsian hero's faith and disbelief. Here is one who is not able to know what his contemporaries are doing. Indeed, he doubts his own existence too:

The desert opens here, and if, though we
 Have ligatured the ends of a farewell,
 Sporadic heartburn show in evidence
 Of love uneconomically slain,
 It is for the last time, the last look back,
 The heel upon the finishing blade of grass,
 To dazzling cities of the plain where lust
 Threatened a sinister rod, and we shall turn
 To our study of stones.... (*New Verse* 6)

Auden's later works and even much of the poetry of the earlier phase fall into a pattern when we see them in the light of the formulations set forth in his *Poems* (1928). Oscillations, however, persist, and he aspires to a different poetic ideal as evident in the poem, "The Rain":

... yet for this brief hour or so
 I am content, unthinking and aglow,
 Made one with horses and with workmen, all
 Who seek for shelter by a dripping wall
 Or labour in the fields with mist and cloud
 And slant rain hiding them as in a shroud. (*Lions and Shadows* 187)

The qualities that he seeks to emulate or recapture are not clearly defined, but certain values might be abstracted from the epithets and images employed: simplicity, sensuous richness, vigour, largeness or width of vision, adequacy or self-sufficiency.

Auden regrets for his failure of *Poems* (1928) because of his wrong choice of poetic model and theme. He observed that so much pain and despondency had swept over his life. Hence in *Poems* (1930), his "longing for assurance takes the form ... of a hawk's vertical stooping from the sky" (70) his "resisting temptations ... to skyline operations" (78); and he endures "heat of day and winter danger ... leaning on chained-up gate ... at edge of wood" (80) and "shining at ... New styles of architecture, a change of heart" (88).

Watching traffic of magnificent cloud
 Moving without anxiety on open sky—

Season when lovers and writers find
 An altering speech for altering things,
 An emphasis on new names, on the arm
 A fresh hand with fresh power.
 But thinking so I came at once
 Where solitary man sat weeping on a bench,
 Hanging his head down, with his mouth distorted
 Helpless and ugly as an embryo chicken. (61)

Auden's *Poems* (1930) is in the nature of a prayer for "another form," "ideas of safety" (45), and a sovereign touch ... curing the intolerable neural itch" (89), and in imaginatively placing himself in the freer world of Eliotian poetry, the poet also expresses his craving for release from the constrictive atmosphere of his immediate environment. He states:

Startled by the violent laugh of a jay
 I went from wood, from crunch underfoot,
 Air between stems as under water;
 As I shall leave the summer, see autumn come
 Focussing stars more sharply in the sky,
 See frozen buzzard flipped down the weir
 And carried out to sea, leave autumn,
 See winter, winter for earth and us,
 A forethought of death that we may find ourselves at death
 Not helplessly strange to the new conditions. (65)

The beauty of the natural world serves as a continuing link between the past and the present, and among the audience that he desires is listed the small circle of his intimate friends, and expressions like "under foot," "under water," and a forethought of death contain an implicit reference to the treatment meted out to him by the reading public. But the poem is free from any trace of bitterness, complaint, and agony, and however, marked by its quiet reserve of power, its rich resonance that anticipates the complex harmonies of *Look, Stranger!* In stylistic maturity, the poems of 1930 surpass anything Auden had written before, and it is also true that, at the formal level, they set the pattern for the later poems.

But the irony of irony is Auden is equally ignorant of the reality of his inner self despite his professed change of heart from the poetic message and the archaic dawn of de la Mare to the contemporary Eliot. Day Lewis puts it as "the old illusion still returns" and the content is still the same, "blue-lustre-drops of noon," "dreams itself immune ... from change and night in which all else is bound" (219). The image of Auden in *Poems* (1930) is, thus, analogous to the image

of Donne in “A Hymne to Christ, at the Authors last going into Germany” who chooses “an Everlasting night” to escape “stormy days” (*MP* 89), and to the image of Donne in “A Hymne to God the Father” who prays,

I have a sinne of feare, that when I have spunne
 My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;
 Swear by thy selfe, that at my death thy Sunne
 Shall shine as it shines now, and heretofore;
 And, having done that, Thou hast done,
 I have no more. (91)

On the whole, Auden’s *Poems* (1930) has rightly absorbed the theme of his juvenile poem “Allendale”:

Dark looming around the fell-folds stretch desolate, crag- scarred,
 Seeming to murmur: ‘Why beat you the bars of your prison?’
 What matter? To us the world-face is glowing and flag-starred,
 Lit by a vision. (*New Verse* 5)

But the aesthetic implicit in the poems of Auden’s contemporaries does not explain the main direction of their thought and work. The return to the simplicity and wide expanse of earlier poetry may be a satisfying experiencing; but the return would mean a denial of the complexity of contemporary sensibility, and Auden’s newly gained Eliotian historical consciousness impelled them to face this complexity, and not to flinch from it.

However in comparison with Auden and Thomas, Day Lewis, Spender, and MacNeice are blessed with no such benediction or delighted discovery. What they gain is only an increased awareness of the limits of the known and of their receding “togetherness,” but the despair is controlled by a calm recognition of the fundamental mystery. MacNeice’s poem “London Rain” makes a more explicit statement of their mind’s despair:

The rain of London pimples
 The ebony street with white
 And the neon-lamps of London
 Stain the canals of night
 And the park becomes a jungle
 In the alchemy of night. (183)

Thomas’s *18 Poems* is about the fallen poets’s fundamental ignorance, and the perplexity is increased by a stark bareness of expression. MacNeice’s poem “Stylite” notes the neo-classic stiffness of style, but this stiffness is part of the poems’s tenor:

Then his eyes close,
 He stands in his sleep,
 Round his neck there comes
 The conscience of a rope,
 And the hangman counting
 Counting to ten—
 At nine he finds
 He has eyes again. (180)

Spender's sense of utter worthlessness of living bursts into a craving for the structure of *18 Poems* "a child's brain," "orchards bear memory in cloudy branches":

Break, O break open, till they break the town
 And show the children to the fields and all their world
 Azure on their sands, to let their tongues
 Run naked into books, the white and green leaves open
 The history theirs whose language is the sun. (*The Still Centre* 28)

The scene of social anomaly reflected in "the hanging despair of eyes in the street" compels Spender to call for "skewers of pity" (33). Spender invokes "the standards of the masters" to save and recall him "from life's exile" (25).

The image of Thomas "above, below, and before" him seems to symbolize the shadow that baulks perpetually Day Lewis's search for reality:

At this blind hour the heart is informed of nature's
 Ruling that man
 Should be nowhere a more tenacious settler than
 Among wry thorns and ruins, yet nurture
 A seed of discontent in his ripest case. (214-15)

In comparing himself to "a mere man," MacNeice speaks of his own diminutive intellect:

Catch them in nets, but either the thread is thin
 Or the mesh big or, thirdly, the fish die
 And man from his false communion dwindled back
 Into a mere man under a mere sky. (210)

While Day Lewis, Spender, and MacNeice are waiting “for words but no words come,” “still quarreling over words,” and having no common “masters,” “no aims in common,” Thomas having Hardy and Yeats as his “masters” in common and “aims in common” continues to “speak in the same language.” In reality, Thomas’s vision of poetry and faith, as MacNeice envisions, is enshrined as “the house” and “the tower” whereas the neurotic vision of Day Lewis, Spender, and MacNeice is analogous to the “Babel” (227-28). Thomas, in the poem “When, Like a Running Grave,” compares them to “hero skull, Cadaver in the hangar” and acknowledges his masters Hardy and Yeats as “lover skull, descending hammer ... descends”:

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.... (149)

But the predicament is general rather than personal according to MacNeice:

Whether the living river
 Began in bog or lake,
 The world is what was given,
 The world is what we make,
 And we only can discover
 Life in the life we make. (184-85)

Thomas sees this ignorance as part of the tragedy of human existence. “As yet ungotten, I did suffer...” (*Poems*).

Auden’s religious sensibility rebelled against the skepticism of Day Lewis and his progress as a poet of contemporary reality in *Transitional Poem*. He became jealous of Day Lewis and did not love him as Day Lewis cared not Auden nor loved him nor his religion nor his God whom Auden loves. Day Lewis’s misery foreshadowed as it were Thomas’s own tragic destiny. The faith that the exploration of modern poetry would enrich his imagination soon gave way to a mistrust in the efficacy and value of imagination itself, and the old conflict between Auden and Day Lewis returns with an intenser force between Auden and Thomas. Thomas records the mystery but not his ignorance. He thinks that society is full of harsh realities. He illustrates this:

I knew the message of the winter,
 The darted hail, the childish snow,
 And the wind was my sister suitor;
 Wind in me leaped, the hellborn dew;

My veins flowed with the Eastern weather;
 Ungotten I knew night and day. (*Poems*)

Poetry is a delicate growth cramped by crookedness, custom, and fear. So, it is very difficult to find joy, peace, and co-existence in society.

Thomas's idea of delight or poetry which is cramped by crookedness is repeated several times in *18 Poems*. It indicates his conviction that if one progresses in life, he is pulled by as it is done everywhere in the world. This idea of Thomas is prevalent in all societies including the London society of poets evidenced in the poems of Walter de la Mare, Eliot, and Auden. Auden, choosing Eliot's *The Waste Land* as his pattern of poetry, wrote *Poems* (1930) to sustain himself and put up a cheerful front even in his poems; but the inner disturbance displaying the innate nature of a bereaved man comes out in the more serious poems of *Look Stranger!*, *Another Time* and in the Sonnet Sequences of *New Year Letter* with the emergence of Thomas as "enormous beauty" (AT 16). *Look Stranger!* shows the tragic aspects of Auden's struggle for existence while highlighting the crises of human values, individual limitations and social codes:

So in this hour of crisis and dismay,
 What better than your strict and adult pen
 Can warn us from the colours and the consolations,
 The showy arid works, reveal
 The squalid shadow of academy and garden,
 Make action urgent and its nature clear?
 Who give us nearer insight to resist
 The expanding fear, the savaging disaster? (66)

The meaning of these lines points out that the reading public are indifferent to him and therefore, his own contemporaries, the dreaded, fading, bygone friends and love do not bring any botheration because he does not have any hopes and desires.

Auden's *Another Time* expands the theme of the lines quoted above. The protagonist speculates that life is not worth living. He recollects his own tragedy caused by his contemporary poets and erstwhile fellow-poets:

Fresh loves betray him, every day
 Over his green horizon
 A fresh deserter rides away,
 And miles away birds mutter
 Of ambush and of treason;
 To fresh defeats he still must move,
 To further griefs and greater,

And the defeat of grief. (16)

And in the Sonnet Sequence of *New Year Letter*, the theme of contemporary poets's inhumanity to Auden is elaborated. Here, the idea of the worst is human loss, waste, misery and suffering—all universal. The worst is the actual phenomenal world;

In a darkness of tribulation and death
 While blizzards havoc the gardens and the old
 Folly becomes unsafe, the mill-wheels
 Rust and the weirs fall slowly to pieces. (186)

These poems while displaying the befitting images of adversity, Auden's "fading hopes and dull spirits" as against the emblems of "enormous beauties," "money and time," dream of vaguer ages," and "the timeless and the rooted" (*AT*) are analogous to the innate nature of a bereaved man as portrayed in Donne's poem "A Hymne to Christ, at the Authors last going into Germany":

In what torne ship soever I embarke,
 That ship shall be my emblems of thy Arke;
 What sea soever swallow mee, that flood
 Shall be to mee an emblem of thy blood;
 Though thou with clouds of anger do disguise
 Thy face; yet through that maske I know those eyes,
 Which, though they turne away sometimes,
 They never will despise. (*MP* 88)

They show the tragic aspects of Auden's struggle for existence. They indelibly depict human strife for a mere survival and the crosses and contradictions of Auden's conflicts with his own inner self, and the surrounding biological environment of Thomas assuring "the seeds of the new life" (*AT* 21) to the community conscious Day Lewis, Spender, and MacNeice.

It is an account of obliteration of religion, malevolence of God, individual limitations, social codes and misunderstanding, Auden could not live in harmony with his fellow poets. Auden himself states:

I, decent with the seasons, moved
 Different or with a different love,
 Nor question overmuch the nod,
 The stone smile of this country god
 That never was more reticent,

Always afraid to say more than it meant. (*Poems* 47)

Hardy's poem "In Tenebris" expresses the same thought in different terms:

Black is night's cope

But death will not appal

One, who past doubtings all,

Waits in unhope. (150)

Hardy is often of the view that religion is often a hindrance than an opportunity for co-existence.

Auden's contemporaries think that they have to travel "the longest way to the intrinsic peace" as they are moving in two worlds "with love's fidelity and with love's weakness" (*Poems* 1930 (46)). Their life's pending plan can be explained in terms of Hardy's poem "The Lacking Sense Scene" :

"And how explains thy Ancient Mind her crimes upon her creatures,

Into her would-be perfect motions, modes, effects, and features

Admitting cramps, black humours, wan decay, and baleful blights,

Distress into delights?" (102)

Day Lewis, Spender and MacNeice resolve to do whatever they wish without any aid or assistance from the external forces. They hardly wish to realize things which are beyond their means. Nor do they aspire for the nether world which is an impossible probability. They are in search of nobility and greater consciousness and for the attainment of this they devise various means and ways. They are certainly in need of a full and purposive life in the purposeless universe. Indeed, they must strive to attain a rational and enlightened human existence which will lead them to self-realization. Thomas states:

Stride through Cadaver's country in my force,

My pickbrain masters morsing on the stone

Despair of blood faith in the maiden's slime,

Halt among the eunuchs, and the nitric stain

On fork and face. (*Poems* 149)

The world is his who exerts himself, who prefers "the spell of inner themes and inner poetries." So, Man is the sum total of his acts. Hardy believing in the evolutionary ameliorism of "the purposed Life," rejects "the Absolute ... in backward Time," "the norm of every royal-reckoned attribute" to constitute one's own "mould" :

But in due days the purposed Life outshone-

Serene, sagacious, free;

--Her waxing seasons bloomed with deeds well done,

And the world's heart was won ...
 Yet may the deed of hers most bright in eyes to be
 Lie hid from ours—as in the All-One's thought lay she-
 Till ripening years have run. (75)

Even according to Yeats, Man has to work hard for a better future:

If on the lost, admit you turned aside
 From a great labyrinth out of pride,
 Cowardice, some silly over-subtle thought
 Or anything called conscience once;
 And that if memory recur, the sun's
 Under eclipse and the day blotted out. (166)

Thomas argues in the poem "I Dreamed My Genesis":

I dreamed my genesis in sweat of death, fallen
 Twice in the feeding sea, grown
 Stale of Adam's brine until, vision
 Of new man strength, I seek the sun. (*Poems*)

Man is his own future, and he is created to outdistance all. Again in the poem "Rome: On the Palatine," Hardy argues that no one gives man his qualities—neither God, nor society, nor his parents and ancestors:

It stirred me as I stood, in Ceasar's house,
 Raised the old routs Imperial lyres had led,
 And blended pulsing life with lives long done,
 Till Time seemed fiction, Past and Present one. (89)

In Thomas's poem "Our Eunuch Dreams," Auden is in many rolls rolled into one. He is the destroyer as well as a memory that sees man's love, joy youth and faith waste away. He is the red-eyed earth" to "pack off the shapes of daylight and their starch, / The sunny gentleman, the Welshing rich, / Or drive the night-gear'd forth" (*Poems*). Auden's conception of the world is an unthinking force that holds man in bondage or in prison. It is a condition, a builder and destroyer, a spirit that separates the lovers. Thomas illustrates:

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. (*Poems*)

When Thomas came under the influence of Hardy and Yeats, his idea of religion, God and the universe was entirely changed. As a result, he became a rationalist and like Hardy and Yeats, he overstressed the power of reason and humanity. He affirms:

No, no, you lover skull, descending hammer
 Descends, my masters, on the entered honour. (*Poems*)

Hardy holds that God who is “features pitiless ... and iron daggers of distress” must “depart,” though “mankind shall cease”:

Man's race shall end, dost threaten thou?
 The age to come the man of now
 Know nothing of?—
 We fear not such a threat from thee;
 We are too old in apathy! (100)

It is on account of his disbelief in God, Yeats states that he could see God in “superhuman”:

I choose upstanding men
 That climb the streams until
 The fountain leap, and at dawn
 Drop their cast at the side
 Of stepping stone.... (167)

Thomas denies the need of the supernatural forces for the transcendence of human life. “Time is a foolish fancy, time and fool” (*Poems*). Hardy compares God to Chance and Time which coincide with human oddities and misfortunes from the cradle to the grave:

Love, were I God, the earth and its heaving airs,
 Angels, the demons abject under me,
 Vast chaos with its teeming womby lairs,
 Time, space, all would I give--aye, upper spheres,
 For a kiss from thee! (165)

Time and Chance make human life agitating, disturbed and drearish, Yeats declares:

They shall inherit my pride,
 The pride of of people that were
 Bound neither to Cause nor to State.
 Neither to slaves that were spat on,
 Nor to the tyrants that spat.... (167)

Thomas rightly rejects Auden's loose generalizations about God and the universe and arrives at a system of true values and real images founded by Hardy and Yeats to support him:

For we shall be a shouter like the cock,
 Blowing the old dead back; our shots shall smack
 The image from the plates;
 And we shall be fit fellows for a life,
 And who remains shall flower as they love,
 Praise to our faring hearts. (110-11)

Thomas believes that when hopes become dupes and everywhere there is darkness and helplessness, there is no benevolent power to lift man to a spot of pure delight, love and life. He firmly affirms that Auden is hostile to human will, action and responsibility. According to Ackerman, Thomas "in his early poems ... seems to be quarrelling with God and His Church, but belief in the reality of God and Christ is always there." So, Hardy, Yeats, and Thomas reverse the optimistic lines of Donne's "Holy Sonnets: Divine Meditations":

Oh make thy selfe with holy mourning blacke,
 And red with blushing, as thou art with sinne;
 Or wash thee in Christs blood, which hath this might
 That being red, it dyes red soules to white. (MP 84)

It so happens that the Aesthetic Existentialism of Yeats falls in line with the Atheistic Existentialism of Hardy. Yeats confesses:

And give his own and take his own
 And rule in his own right;
 And though it loved in misery
 Close and cling so tight,
 There's not a bird of day that
 Extinguish that delight. (43)

Auden who has hinted at God's Grace as an essential thing for the emergence of poet as hero to his contemporaries in *Poems* (1930)--whose "divided face / Has no grace, / No discretion, / No occupation" to attain "the easy knowledge ... of the virtuous thing" (*Poems* 1930 48-49)-- clearly believes in *Look Stranger!* that "the defeated and disfigured figures" (*LS* 63) by simplifying "all sorrow" and by constructing and emulating the poetic model of Thomas would not ensure their recoverability and regeneration and "their dreams of freedom," of alchemizing their "hero skull, Cadaver in the hangar" (*Poems*) into immortals for "that hopeful falsehood cannot stem with love ... the flood on which all move and wish to move." What is essential, according to Auden, is contrition, "sighs for folly said and done ... twist our narrow days", for atonement or for luck" (60) "to take the all- night journey under sea, ... work west and northward, set up building" (62).

But Thomas, rejecting Auden's totalization of abstract thought, his optimism in God's grace and his modernism, his "predestined need" to voice "our design", advocates to the cramped poets a self-orientated and life-centred post modernistic ideal, imaginative model and method to execute their will, to "invest, ... measure and frame our mortal best" (DCP). He informs:

Joy is no knocking nation, sir and madam,
 The cancer's fashion or the summer feather
 Lit on the cuddled tree, the cross of fever,
 Not city tar and subway bored to foster
 Man through the macadam. (149)

The poem "When, Like a Running Grave" which underlines Thomas's dislike for the last decade, focuses on the ultimate end of the time-conscious poetry: profitlessness, domestic unhappiness and social disgrace:

All, men my madmen, the unwholesome wind
 With whistler's cough contages, time on track
 Shapes in a cinder death; love for his trick,
 Happy Cadaver's hunger as you take
 The kissproof world. (150)

The full-hearted song of the aged Yeats, "The Tower" also indicates to Thomas the sweet mystical possibility in the world of poets. Thomas explains:

I dump the waxlights in your tower dome.
 Joy is the knock of dust, Cadaver's shoot
 Of bud of Adam through his boxy shift,
 Love's twilit nation and the skull of state,
 Sir, is your doom. (*Poems*)

But Thomas, according to MacNeice, apart from finding his own form and vision of art as apolitical, asocial, and amoral, works for co-existence and fellowship with the other poets:

Yet in his mind
 A crowd of odd components mutter and press
 For compromise with fact, longing to be combined
 Into working whole but cannot jostle through
 The permanent bottleneck of his high mindedness. (*MCP*)

From being a mortal prototype of the immortal spirits, Yeats ascends to the plane of divinity himself. He commands the future Irish poets to cast their poetry on “their unremembering hearts and heads / Base-born products of base beds” and “the indomitable Irishry” (YCP) to earn their “trade” and immortality. He rejects what he calls the superstitious notion of God’s grace in the process of redemption and attaining to immortality. According to Yeats, the poet must be good, heroic and responsible. He must be human in his co-existence with others.

Old lecher with a love on every wind,
 Bring up out of that deep considering mind
 All that you have discovered in the grave,
 For it is certain that you have
 Reckoned up every unforeknown, unseeing
 Plunge, lured by a softening eye,
 Or by a touch or a sigh,
 Into the labyrinth of another’s being; (166)

The poet must create an environment and tolerate the ills around him for the welfare of other people. This is what Hardy calls immortality in the poem “His Immortality”:

I saw a dead man’s finer part
 Shining within each faithful heart
 Of those bereft. Then said I : “This must be
 His immortality.(127)

Thomas persuades Auden’s contemporaries to recognize the ambiguities and complexities of life to become surrealistic and self-oriented to generate hopes for poetry and immortality, by learning the models of the immortal poets “the living clay” to know “the value of our stay”, “the order of our day” to “distil” from life “rare personal good” and ensure their being footed as “the honoured clay” (DCP 182-83). He remembers the system of poetic values as enshrined in the postmodernism of Hardy and Yeats who ended all association with transcendental meaning, certitude and coherence:

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 action's end. (149-50)

MacNeice holds that Auden's "imputed purpose ... is a foregone design--" in contradistinction to the purposeful human "prototypes" of Thomas and his individuation. He adds:

And ours is not. For we are unique, a conscious
 Hoping and therefore despairing creature, the final
 Anomaly of the world, we can learn no methods
 From whales or birds or worms;
 Our end is our own to be won by our own endeavour
 And held on our own terms. (217)

In Thomas's postmodernism, man on this earth is an epigone and he has to find truth for himself. This truth which is his personal construct is totally free from the influences of Auden's transcendental quality and his metaphysical thinking.

The theme of this *18 Poems* is closely resembles Hardy's poem "The Darkling Thrush":

I leant upon a coppice gate
 When Frost was spectre-gray,
 And Winter's dregs made desolate
 The weakening eye of day.
 The tangled bine-stems scored the sky
 Like strings of broken lyres,
 And all mankind that haunted night
 Had sought their household fires. (119)

Hardy, though expresses regrets about the the bygone time, tells us that the next century will bring us new hopes, new beliefs and new order of life. There is a sense of hope, according to which, the shaken and the dead will be replaced by a new order, "all new eyes, ... new minds, new modes, new fools, new wise" (Hardy 167).

CONCLUSIONS

So Thomas's *18 Poems* "throbs visibly ... between the pines, the tombs," between the past and the present, Donne and Hardy, Hardy and Yeats, Auden and Thomas, Day Lewis and Auden, loss and profit, death and life, suffering

and salvation. Hardy's *Poems for the Present and the Past* and Yeats's *The Tower and Last Poems* gave Thomas the necessary rule and energy, beauty and truth, form and faith to "plan for the present." Thomas's *18 Poems* reveals the noble ideas and ideals of Hardy and Yeats on joy, bliss and justice which are quite beyond the reach of politics, human reason and intellect. To him, poetry written for the sake of delight and self-expression is neither historical nor political, neither modernistic nor moralistic but biological and archetypal.

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