



Dylan Thomas and the Ghost of Shakespeare

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EPI-REVEL

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Dylan Thomas and the Ghost of Shakespeare

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[...] there are ghosts in the air
And ghostly echoes on paper,
And the thunder of calls and notes.
(*'I have longed to move away'*, CP 64) (1)

Intertextual echo and allusion abound in Thomas's poetry. The importance of the Bible is well known and has been thoroughly documented. Little attention has been paid to Thomas's debt to literary forbears - Blake, Beddoes, Thomson, Shakespeare - to name but a few that the poet recognized as major influences upon his work. Inevitably perhaps, it was Shakespeare who made the greatest impact upon the burgeoning poet as upon the actual texture and content of his verse. Thomas's father, a teacher of English literature and, by his son's admission, "a great reader-aloud of Shakespeare"(2), read the plays to his son from the impressionable age of four. Later, at school, the barrage continued as Shakespeare was recited over the heads of the boys who sat spell-bound at "the quite incomprehensible magical majesty and nonsense of Shakespeare heard, read and near-murdered in the first-forms of my school"(3). The choice of terms is revealing, reflecting as they do the diverse comments and criticisms aimed principally at the apparent impenetrability of Thomas's own verse with its combination of tortuous, almost indecipherable imagery on the one hand and, on the other, the sheer exultation and richness of sound and music, similar to the 'hwyl' rolling from the pulpit in the churches and chapels of Wales. Could it be that the texture and timbre of adult Thomas's verse, its combination of semantic impermeousness and rhetorical inflation are rooted in a subconscious identity with, and yearning for, the unreflecting sense of mystery and wonder experienced by the schoolboy caught in the flow of Shakespearean verbal majesty? Whatever, echoes of Shakespeare resound in image and sound at every stage of Thomas's poetic development. In the following lines, I intend to outline some of the ways in which Shakespeare continues to haunt Thomas's work adding a flavour and a dimension which, while distinctly Shakespearean, are perfectly integrated into Thomas's own vision and verse.

Most obviously, perhaps, Shakespeare is present in the rhythms and metres of Thomas's lines. Though often cited as a rare example of the syllabic poet, Thomas also distils a personal variant of the (mostly) iambic pentameter so characteristic of the Bard. Take these few lines from an early poem "Hold hard, those ancient minutes":

Hold hard, my country children in the world of tales,
The greenwood dying as the deer fall in their tracks,
This first and steepled season, to the summer's game. (CP 49)

Or again, these lines from "How soon the servant sun" in which the iambic pentameter is thinly disguised behind the typographical lay-out of the lines:

How soon the servant sun,
(Sir morrow mark),
Can time unriddle, and the cupboard stone...(CP 56)

Despite the semantic obstacles, or perhaps in part because of them, a distinctly Shakespearean accent and fullness roll through the rhythms and sounds, reinforced by characteristic alliteration and assonance. The choice of word and image too has a

characteristically Shakespearian ring as with the Elizabethan pun on the word 'mark' and the use of archaisms ('morrow') or a perceptibly unmodern vocabulary. Thomas once praised the 'simplicity' of Shakespeare(4), by which one may conclude he was referring to the dramatist's universality. It is this same archetypal or cosmic appeal which imbues so much of Thomas's own language and imagery with its preference for the generic noun or generalizing verb. Hence, despite its modernistic obscurity, the timeless, even archaic, quality of so much of Thomas's verse, a quality which is all the more surprising as literary fashion in the thirties was advocating allusion to contemporary artefacts and the use of modern technological language. A single example must suffice to illustrate the atemporal nature of Thomas's language and vision closer in texture to those of the Elizabethans than to Macspaunday:

All all and all the dry worlds lever,
 Stage of the ice, the solid ocean,
 All from the oil, the pound of lava.
 City of spring, the governed flower,
 Turns on the earth that turns the ashen
 Towns around on a wheel of fire. (CP 33)

Shakespearian sound and 'simplicity', of course, are further compounded here, as often in Thomas's verse, by oblique allusion to, or direct borrowings from, the plays.. "All the world's a stage" provides the backbone for the opening lines, while the "pound of lava" nods at Shylock's "pound of flesh" (all the harder as 'flesh' is alluded to several lines furtheron.) while the "wheel of fire" is readily recognizable as a borrowing from *King Lear*. Intertextual ghosting of this kind is sufficiently common in Thomas's verse to constitute a leitmotiv, particularly in the earlier poems. References are made most frequently, though not exclusively, to *Hamlet*, *The Tempest* and *King Lear*, three plays which no doubt figured large upon the growing poet's school curriculum but which also provided him, as we shall see later, with relevant 'metaphors for poetry'. On occasion, the echo is barely perceptible, a mere word or image. Hence, in "I dreamed my genesis", for instance, 'sweat of sleep', 'shuffled off', 'the creasing flesh' all carry oblique references to Hamlet's monologues. At other times, the poem condenses incidents or scenes from the plays. In "When once the twilight locks no longer", the lines

All issue armoured of the grave...
 Some dead undid their bushy jaws. (CP 4)

recall the apparition of Hamlet's dead father in armour while the lines from "I followed sleep":

An old mad man still climbing in his ghost,
 My father's ghost is climbing in the rain. (CP 27)

fuses memories from both *Hamlet* and *Lear*. A similar blending of images from different sources is explicated in "I, in my intricate image" where Hamlet is harnessed to Ariel's song of the shipwrecked Prospero in *The Tempest*:

And the five fathomed Hamlet on his father's coral. (CP 38)

Or again in "Today this insect" where Hamlet once more combines with echoes of *Lear*:

Death: death of Hamlet and the nightmare madmen.(CP 41)

What then is Thomas purpose in drawing so abundantly on Shakespearian material? The answer, as one might expect with the author of "I, in my intricate image", is complex, even tortuous. To begin with, a Shakespearian thread helps add body and texture to what

might otherwise be a limper, less substantial weave. Shakespeare, along with Biblical and other literary allusions, help root Thomas's verse in a global and time-honoured cultural substrat. Secondly, and more perverse, Shakesperean reference, in word and image, acts as a decoy, an erudite ploy intended to present a surface meaning while concealing Thomas's underlying symbolism. At this level, Shakespeare functions as a form of window-dressing or, to put it another way, as a mask which the poet deploys to disguise and protect his meaning from 'the spies of the sharp enamelled eyes' (CP 85), doubtless the cerebral academic critics Thomas despised and feared.

Here, as elsewhere, however, Thomas functions 'on two levels'(CP 35). His Shakespearian mask, like Yeats's, both conceals and reveals, constituting an integral though occult part of what he was attempting to express. More fundamental to an understanding of Thomas's verse than the cosmetic features I have touched on so far, this dimension deserves further treatment. I will begin by isolating some of the aspects associated with what I will call Thomas's 'dramatic technique' before providing an analysis and interpretation of its significance in the context of the poems.

*

Although not a dramatic poet in the manner of Milton, Keats or Browning, building up sustained or epic encounters between protagonists both human and divine, Thomas's poetic imagination, even in its more lyrical mode, is fundamentally dramatic, even theatrical. His poems aim at the creation of a mental space, a kind of imaginary stage in which he attempts to reconcile the linearity of a discourse or plot and the spatial simultaneity of theatre. A key element in the elaboration of this *mise-en-scène* is Thomas's method of establishing encounter and opposition between characters within a dramatic frame. The voices of his poems are presented as *dramatis personae* engaged in a tableau which unfolds as the poem progresses. This technique is most obvious in those poems which involve several speakers engaged in an exchange of views or attitudes. "I see the boys of summer," the first piece in *Collected Poems*, immediately sets the tone. Two sets of voices, one issuing from "the man of winter" the other from "the boys of summer", set up a formalized dialogue in which the boys defend their lusty sensuality which is under attack from the voice of age and authority. The two voices finally melt and merge in a cathartic conclusion and fusion of opposites:

"O see the poles are kissing as they cross." (CP 3)

Although scarcely dramatic by the swiftness of their action or the heightening of tension, these poems are nonetheless dramatizations in as far as they create a theatrical space in which characters, other than the writer himself, are placed in situations of opposition leading up to a final resolution. This is illustrated in poems like "If my head hurt a hair's foot" where there is a formalized dialogue and acting out of a poignant scene between an unborn child and its mother-to-be. Thomas's meaning, whatever it is, is not contained in the words of either protagonist but in their verbal and existential jousting and their ultimate resolution.

The notion of a 'dramatic space' within the poem is easy enough to grasp when several voices are involved.. The idea is more difficult to demonstrate when a single voice is involved. However, a distinctly dramatic effect is created by virtually all the poems written in the first person which constitute the bulk of the entries in *Collected Poems*.. In one mode, the 'poet-hero' declaims his lines in a self-consciously rhetorical and almost histrionic manner. The verse is intended to be heard, or rather overheard, in the manner of a soliloquy, unveiling the workings of the inner mind to a captive but silent audience. This is well illustrated by the much-anthologized "This bread I break". The poem involves a double *mise-en-scène* in which the speaker poses as a priest upon the altar or Christ at the Last Supper:

This bread I break was once the oat,
 This wine upon a foreign tree
 Plunged in its fruit. (CP 39).

After two stanzas of soliloquy-style declamation, the speaker as actor turns to the reader as audience involving him/her in the dramatic illusion created within the poem:

This flesh you break, this blood you let
 Make desolation in the vein,
 Were oat and grape...(CP 39)

In both approaches, the poet creates a zone of attentive silence, a dramatic space involving both protagonists and reader.

In a second mode, the central 'persona', while continuing to speak in the first person, apostrophizes other protagonists in a second or third person form. Here, the 'hero' addresses himself to a variety of secondary actors within the poem, engaging them as participants in his mental drama as shown in this scattering of lines from "When like a running grave":

Deliver me, my masters, head and heart...
 No, no, you lover skull...
 You hero skull, cadaver in the hangar...
 Joy is no knocking nation, sir and madam...
 Descend, my masters, on the entered honour. (CP 18-19)

Both the above-mentioned modes are aimed at the same effect, the reduction of the poem's linear or intellectual content and an emphasis upon the dynamic relationships set up between independent protagonists and actors within a synchronic field or space. The poem signifies less by its semantic content than by the clash, interaction and harmonization of actors and forces within an imaginary setting.

Never a poet of nature for its own sake, Thomas introduces natural decors as backdrop, and occasionally, as symbolic participant in these dramatic conflicts. Such is the 'wars of sparrows' in "Over Sir John's Hill"(CP 167), the interplay of wolf, lamb and 'rutish farm' in the dramatized fairy tale in "In Country Sleep"(CP 162). Or again, in an earlier poem, "Where once the waters of your face", where the sea is both stage and actor in a strange symbolic drama involving the tides, dolphins, the ghosts of children and some mysterious character addressed in the second person:
 Invisible your clocking tides

Break on the lovebeds of the weeds;
 The weed of love's left dry;
 There round about your stones the shades
 Of children go who, from their voids,
 Cry to the dolphined sea. (CP 11).

Apart from the occasional echo, Thomas's "dramatism" in lines like these has little direct connection with the works of Shakespeare although it is more than likely that he derived his feel for the stage and for dramatic presentation from his experience of acting the plays(5). His dramatic settings and characters however serve as a framework for a much more overtly Shakespearian "drama" in which characters, themes and, occasionally, settings are derived from specific scenes in the plays.

Throughout his work, most tellingly in the poems up to and including *A Map of Love*, there is more than a hint of the hamletic tone and predicament. Like Shakespeare's

prince, Thomas's 'hero', the central consciousness within the poems, evinces a frequent inability to act:

I have longed to move away but am afraid...(CP 64)

At times, execution of desire is impeded by awareness and fear of hidden forces from the past:

Some life, yet unspent, might explode
Out of the old lie burning on the ground. (CP 64)

On occasion, indecision and self-interrogation result from an incapacity to process the bewildering messages from the world:

Hands of the strangers and holds of the ships,
Hold you poison or grapes? (CP 59)

Confronted, like Hamlet, with an insoluble dialectic, he discovers the rottenness at the core of existence:

My heart knew love, my belly hunger.
I smelt the maggot in my stool.(CP 8)

And, like Shakespeare's prince, he is threatened by nightmare and madness. In "Love in the Asylum", he shares his room with an Ophelia, 'a girl mad as birds' and, like Hamlet, combining the dual roles of actor and madman he strides upon the stage of the asylum: 'the madhouse boards worn thin by my walking tears' (CP 108). Like Hamlet too, he is obsessed and haunted by death. At times, the Shakespearean comparison is explicit as in "Today this insect": 'Death, death of Hamlet and the nightmare madmen (CP 41). Or, more often, obliquely, as in the image of 'the country-handed graved boxed into love' in "A grief ago" (CP 55) with its multiple punning echoes of Ophelia's funeral. Or again, in "Now", this allusive reference to the appearance of the ghost in the opening scenes of *Hamlet*:

"Death hairy-heeled and the tapped ghost in wood" (CP 52)

Thomas's 'hero', once again like Hamlet, is literally pursued by ghosts. 'Ghost' is used forty-four times in the *Collected Poems*, not to mention lexical derivatives or synonyms like 'shade' or 'shadow' which, in Thomas, almost inevitably carry spectral connotations. Thomas's ghost is not always specifically of the hamletic variety. The Biblical Holy Ghost, among other, also haunts these lines. However, unmistakable references to the ghost scenes in *Hamlet* are numerous enough to impart a decidedly hamletic flavour on all the usages of the image. At all events, references to 'my father's ghost' (CP 27), the 'warning ghost' (CP 20), the 'half-ghost in armour' (CP 35), or again 'the issue armoured, of the grave' who 'undid their bushy jaws' leave little doubt that, at one level at least, Thomas had Shakespeare's ghost in mind as he elaborated his own dramatic universe. Several poems contain sustained, though modified, evocations of the ghost scene.. This one, for instance, from "Now" with its reference to the mode of Hamlet's father's murder and to the cock-crow which recalled him to the fires of hell:

And this, nor this is shade, the landed crow,
He lying low with ruin in his ear,
The cockerel's tide upcasting from the fire.(CP 51)

On occasion, Thomas extends the hamletic analogy to suggest the notion of a betrayal involving not only sexual estrangement but actual severance in death. The threads of

allusion to Gertrude's incestuous marriage to Claudius and the ghost's denunciation are clearly interwoven in these lines from "Into her lying down head":

Two sand grains together in bed [...]

One voice in chains declaims

The female, deadly, and male

Libidinous betrayal...

With the incestuous secret brother in the seconds to perpetuate

the stars,

A man torn up mourns in the sole night. (CP 115)

If the Shakespearian echoes are fairly evident in passages of this kind, it is equally clear that Thomas has transformed the material extensively both lexically and as regards the function the lines are called on to perform. This is no mere plot summary, nor a casual allusion but a reworking of images and situations heavy with cultural and symbolic connotations into a new and personal vision. What this vision is now deserves to be made clearer.

*

To summarize, it could be claimed that Thomas's verse consistently enacts an internalized struggle or psychodrama in which each 'character' represents an aspect of mind or personality while, at the same time, symbolically representing the mental and physical processes which gave rise to the poem. The 'hero' and the 'ghost' in his hamletic drama embody two opposing facets or moments in this ongoing process aimed at final resolution in harmony and creation. Such is the dramatic structure in the opening lines of "I, in my intricate image", an early poem in which Thomas outlines his poetic method:

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 side.(CP 35)

'Hero' and 'ghost' in fact constitute the two facets of a double mental universe, the 'twin world' of the creative consciousness. On the one hand strides the hamletic posturer, the 'brassy orator'. He is 'forged in man's minerals' because integrated into physical reality. It is he who represents the conscious level of the poetic mind attempting by artifice ('forged') and by his music ('brassy') to embody the impalpable contents of subconscious imagination. In this context, 'to lay in metal' suggests not only the exorcising of the ghost but the arrangement of the printer's type-metal necessary to give life upon the printed page to the formless contents of the inner mind.. Hence, while Thomas's ghost, as a general rule, suggests the disincarnated and alien condition of the unexpressed imagination ('doom in the ghost') or acts as a metaphor of the imagination itself ('image of images'), the more specifically hamletic vision of the armour-clad ghost ('my metal phantom', 'ghost in metal') provides an image of creative unity and poetic realization:

My man of leaves and the bronze root, mortal, immortal,

I, in my fusion of rose and male motion,

Create this twin miracle. (CP 35)

The fusion of formless contents and the form of language, the king-pin perhaps of all literary creation, is central not only to Thomas's poetic practice but also to the metaphorical content and dramatic structure of his verse with its heavy metaliterary bias. 'What is [...] shade without shape,' he asks in "Altarwise by owl-light IV" (CP 72), summing up the hamletic dilemma of the poet-hero confronted with the duty of embodying in language the message bequeathed by the spectral depths of the imagination. For such is the rôle of the poet constantly reiterated by Thomas, to give form to the ghostly essence of thought and image in shapes and sounds hewn by the working brain:

I learned [...] to twist the shapes of thoughts
Into the stony idiom of the brain [...] (CP 21)

Ghost and shade in Thomas's symbology are inseparable from the notion of the dead since the latter represent image and experience buried in memory. The role of the poet, in his function as hamletic hero, is to revive memory in language:

To shade and kit anew the patch of words
Left by the dead...(CP 21)

Hence the rôle of the hamletic hero is to give shape and form to his father's ghost, the ethereal source, in sound and image. As a result, much of Thomas's work can be seen as a process of recreation in which the poet engenders his own begetter, is father to the man. "Do not go gently", "The tombstone told when she died", "After the funeral", "Among those killed in the dawn-raid" are but a few of the poems in which the celebration and imaginary resurrection of the dead acts as a symbol of the poet's desire, as he composes his poem, to revive and regenerate the contents of memory. "Let him find no rest but be fathered and found", writes Thomas in an elegy composed for his own (real) father but in which the personal theme also involves a symbolic treatment of poetic creation itself. Realization is achieved when father and son are joined in verse in a union of opposites. The final lines of "I see the boys of summer" mark just such a fusion of the rebel sons and the returning father-figure:

I am the man your father was.
We are the sons of flint and pitch.
O see the poles are kissing as they cross. (CP 3)

Similar fusion of father and son in "Do you not father me":

Am I not father, too, and the ascending boy [...]
Am I not all of you by the directed sea

Where bird and shell are babbling in my tower? (CP 46)

The apotheosis of union between father and son, the potential of ghost and the unfulfilled talent of the poet-hero, is hinted at most often by the use of metaphors of sound and music, evoking the music of the poem itself. Such are the references in the lines quoted above to the sea as orchesra ('directed sea') and to bird and shell as sources of song and echo. In certain poems, this 'sea-change' produced by the music of the poem is reflected in the transformation of the ghost of Hamlet, the disinherited and formless exile, into the person of Prospero, yet another returning father, but one who achieved fulfilment and life in magic and song. In a passage from "I, in my intricate image", the process of embodying the 'bodiless image' of the ghost produces a transformation into music and redemption suggested by the allusion to Ariel's song "Full-fathom five" in *The Tempest*:

Be by your one ghost pierced, his pointed ferrule,
Brass and the bodiless image, on a stick of folly [...]
And the five-fathomed Hamlet on his father's coral

Thrusting the tom-thumb vision up the iron mile. (CP 38)

Both the 'tom-thumb vision'(with its pun on the poet's name) and 'the stick of folly' are characteristic metaliterary allusions to Thomas's own fantastic and miniature (in comparison with Shakespeare) poetic vision and to the rod of poetic madness which is quite literally the poem on the page. The echoes from *The Tempest*, with their suggestion of the return of Prospero, the father and magician, to restore order and unity to the island, is of course a development of the theme of the returning father-figure dear to Thomas. The Shakespearean allusions now begin to take on the shape of a myth. The suggestion is that the son, the hamletic poet-hero, after an descent into the sea of memory has re-emerged as the all-powerful creator having transformed the dead father into the permanence of coral. The image of coral recurs several times in Thomas's verse, each time hinting at a sea-change transforming the dryness and formless vestiges of death into the shape, beauty and permanence of coral, symbol of death redeemed. The final stanza of "Where once the waters of your face", for instance, culminates in a vision which is heavily indebted to *The Tempest* in which death is transformed into colour, shape and lasting life, imaging the function of poetry itself:

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. (CP 11)

If Thomas occasionally adopts Prospero the wizard as the symbol of the poet as redeemer, capturing imagination in the living shape of word and song, he also at times, and somewhat paradoxically, turns to King Lear to express a similar blend of age and youth, proximity to death and creative vitality. Influenced perhaps by Yeats's vision of Lear in "Lapis Lazuli" depicting an old man, tragic yet gay, (6) Thomas images Lear as close to death, an isomorph of the 'father-ghost' figure, yet at the same time filled with the rush of youth: "savagely young King Lear", as he writes in "Into her Lying Down Head" (CP113). For Thomas, Lear's strength lies in his 'savageness', the uncontrolled fury or madness which rejuvenates and transforms him just as Yeats emphasized the old man's 'rage' as the source of his virality. It is just such a mood of 'rage', echoed in diverse images of anger, madness, raving and so forth, which frequently acts as vector in the process of creation and redemption. In "Do not go gentle into that good night", a most personal poem addressed to the poet's dying father, the memory of Lear lingers:

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
 Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
 Rage, rage against the dying of the light.(CP 116)

The biographical reference locks into the poet's deep mental structures, his personal myth of loss and redemption through word and sound. 'Rage', the impassioned lust for life, translated into the ranting of passionate speech, is thus a dramatic equivalent of the irrational impulse, the poetic frenzy which translates the lost into life and shapelessness into form and language. The poet-hero speaks with "parched and raging voice" (CP 91). And 'rage' is the source from which he creates:

From the raging moon I write
 On these spindrift pages.(CP 128)

The Shakespearean allusion is almost totally occulted here. However, the 'raging moon' assumes its full significance as the expression of Thomas's myth of creation only if we bear in mind the connotations accreted in other poems.. Taken globally, such strains

inform and enrich Thomas's poetic vision, lending depth, coherence and imaginative power to the expression of his personal vision. Thomas is perhaps no Bard, but the sounds, lexical texture, dramatic conflicts and ghostly echoes of Shakespeare are an integral, even an indispensable feature, in the 'quite incomprehensible magical majesty and nonsense' of his verse.

NOTES

- (1) All quotations from Thomas's verse are taken from *Collected Poems*, Dent, London, 1952, 182p, abbreviated to CP.
- (2) To C. Gordon Glover, May 25 1948, *Collected Letters of Dylan Thomas*, ed. Dent, London, 1985, p.674.
- (3) "Poetic Manifesto", quoted in Andrew Sinclair, *Dylan Thomas, Poet of his People*, Michael Joseph, London 1975, p.230.
- (4) Letter to P.H. Johnson, October 1933, in *Collected Letters, op.cit.*, p.35. In the same letter, Thomas also mentions his admiration for the "simplicity" of Mozart. He adds: "It is the simplicity of the human mind that believes the universal mind to be as simple."
- (5) As a young man, Thomas was involved in amateur dramatic societies. Later, as a BBC-radio reader, he participated in a number of productions of Shakespeare plays including *Richard III* and *King Lear*.
- (6) "Lapis Lazuli", in *Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, MacMillan, London, 1961, p. 338
 All perform their tragic play,
 There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,
 That's Ophelia, that Cordelia;
 Yet they, should the last scene be there,
 The great stage curtain about to drop,
 If worthy their prominent part in the play,
 Do not break up their lines to weep.
 Gaiety transforming all that dread.