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IMAGES OF CREATION AND DESTRUCTION

IN THE EARLY POETRY OF

DYLAN THOMAS

BY

WILLARD LISTON RUDD

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND
IN CANDIDACY
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

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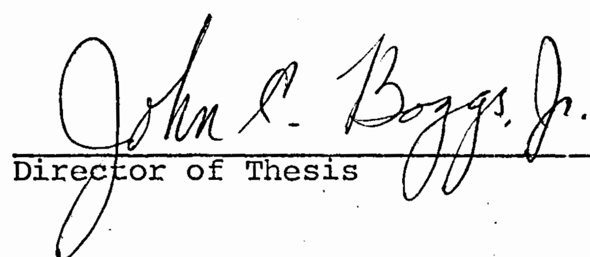

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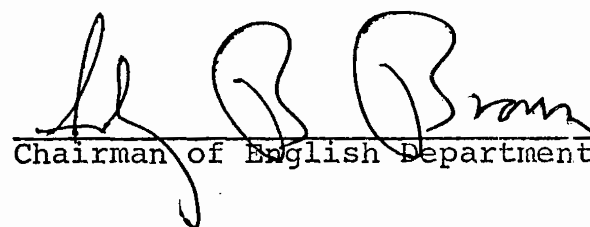

Chairman of English Department

INTRODUCTION

In a much quoted letter to Henry Treece, Dylan Thomas presented his views on the importance of imagery in his early poetry.[1]

> A poem by me needs a host of images. I make one image - though "make" is not the word; I let, perhaps, an image be "made" emotionally in me and then apply to it what intellectual and critical forces I possess; let it breed another, let that image contradict the first; make of the third image, bred out of the two together, a fourth contradictory image, and let them all, within my imposed formal limits, conflict. Each image holds within it the seed of its own destruction, and my dialectical method, as I understand it, is a constant building up and breaking down of the images that come out of that central seed, which is itself destructive and constructive at the same time . . . . The life in any poem of mine cannot move concentrically round a central image, the life must come out of the center; an image must be born and die in another; and any sequence of my images must be a sequence of creations, recreations, destructions, [and] contradictions . . . . Out of the inevitable conflict of images - inevitable because of the creative, recreative, destructive, and contradictory nature of the motivating

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[1]The phrase "early poetry" is intended to indicate those poems published between 1933 and 1939.

> center, the womb of war — I try to
> make that momentary peace which is
> a poem.[2]

Exactly what Thomas meant by "conflicting" and "contradictory" images has been the subject of much debate among his critics. C. Day Lewis believes "contradiction" to mean the "bringing together of images, of objects that have no natural affinity; or perhaps it might be more accurate to say objects which would not on the face of it seem to make for consistency of impression."[3] Elder Olson believes that the conflict Thomas speaks of is actually the result of Thomas' substituting the idea of one entity for the idea of another different but similar entity (e.g. the term "Atlas Eater" of Sonnet I of the "Altarwise by Owlight" sequence results from the substitution of the word "Atlas" for the idea of map, which is itself a substitution for the idea of "world").[4] Other critics insist that Thomas' conflicting images are metaphysical conceits; still others believe Thomas' imagery is a product of automatic

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[2]Quoted by Derek Stanford, "Critics, Style, and Value," from Dylan Thomas (London, 1954). Reprinted in A Casebook on Dylan Thomas, ed. John M. Brinnin (New York, 1960), pp. 93-94.

[3]Ibid., p. 94.

[4]Elder Olson, The Poetry of Dylan Thomas (Chicago, 1954), p. 5.

writing. A final group of critics accepts Geoffrey Grigson's opinion and dismiss Thomas' poetry as no more than a "meaningless hot sprawl of mud."[5]

One possible explanation for the diversity of opinion about the contradictory nature of images in Thomas' poetry may be that the critics have placed too much emphasis on the interaction of the images and not enough on the individual images themselves. A quick reading of Thomas' early poetry reveals that he tends to use certain images over and over again. References to salt, Adam, worms and the sea, for example, abound in his poems. Likewise, Thomas' themes are severely limited and differ very little from one poem to the next. Repeatedly he stresses that birth is the first symptom of death, that all living things carry within them the seeds of their own destruction, and that the poet's duty is to recreate or reflect in his verse the eternal flow from womb to tomb that controls man and nature.

Similarity of theme and repetition of imagery were the two characteristics of Dylan Thomas' poetry that prompted my attempt to group and classify Thomas' images according to their thematic significance. In order to determine

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[5]Geoffrey Grigson, "How Much Me Now Your Acrobatics Amaze," from _The Harp of Aeolus_ (London, 1947). Reprinted in _A Casebook on Dylan Thomas_, ed. John M. Brinnin (New York, 1960), p. 119.

which images were consistently relevant to one or all of the three major themes mentioned above, I read through Thomas' _Collected Poems_[6] and recorded all recurrent images on index cards. In addition, the line of poetry in which the image occurred and a brief statement of the image's thematic function within its context was also included on each card. William York Tindall's _A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas_,[7] a poem-by-poem textual analysis of _Collected Poems_, was an invaluable aid to my understanding of the relation of image to theme, and it should be stated here that the explications of Thomas' images and poems found in this thesis are either wholly Tindall's or else were prompted and guided by his analyses.

Of the 150 different images which recurred in the first 110 pages of Collected Poems (corresponding to the first three volumes of Thomas' poetry,[8]) I eliminated those which appeared less than three times.[9] Likewise, I eliminated

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[6] _Dylan Thomas: Collected Poems_ (New York, 1957).

[7] William York Tindall, _A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas_ (New York, 1962).

[8] _18 Poems_ (1934), _Twenty-Five Poems_ (1936), and _The Map of Love_ (1939).

[9] Every poem contained at least one recurrent image. The number of cards per poem ranged from the single image in "Once It Was the Color of Saying" to the forty seven entries taken from "I, In My Intricate Image."

those images and allusions to which Thomas did not seem to attach a particular and consistent meaning. The images that remained constituted what may be called Dylan Thomas' personal symbols. Some of these "symbols" were actually simple analogies (e.g., insects as poems; trees as poetry; dog as Thomas himself). Also included in Thomas' private stock were words, such as fork and fellow, which he favored because their multiple definitions allowed him to use them in a number of unrelated ways.[10] A third group of images, however, seemed to be exactly what I had hoped to find, for these images were all directly associated with some aspect of Thomas' major theme of birth and eath, creation and destruction.

As previously mentioned, Thomas was obsessed with the idea of a "life principle" which created life only to destroy it. His "The Force That Through the Gren Fuse Drives the Flower" perhaps best sums up the awe he felt at the workings of this all-consuming "force":

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[10] Tindall notes that fork, for instance, can mean divide, pierce, hold, or throw when used as a verb. As a noun, fork applies to the division in a tree, road, or river. Fork also refers to a tuning fork and serves as a synonym for groin. As an adjective, fork can mean ambiguous or equivocal. Thomas uses all of the above denotations of fork at least once. (Tindall, p. 160).

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.

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.

The hand that whirls the water in the pool
Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing
    wind
Hauls my shroud sail.
And I am dumb to tell the hanging man
How of my clay is made the hangman's lime.

The lips of time leech to the fountain head;
Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood
Shall calm her sores.
And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind
How time has ticked a heaven round the stars.

And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb
How at my sheet goes the came crooked worm.

The life principle, or "force", both creates life and destroys it; it "drives the flower" but also "blasts the roots." Furthermore, this force unites man with external nature, a point which Thomas' emphasizes by paralleling phenomena of nature with features of his own anatomy (*e.g.*, water and blood, dry streams and embalmed veins). This affinity Thomas feels with nature presents a particular problem for him as a poet. He wishes to communicate with the non-human elements of nature, but since he has only words at his disposal, he cannot. His attempts to tell a rose, his own veins, a hanging

man and the wind that he too is controlled by the omnipotent "force" meet with failure. The last two lines of the poem not only capture the creative/destructive nature of the force, but also reveal the frustration Thomas the poet feels as he tries to express the inexpressible:

> And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb
> How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.

Three interpretations of these lines are possible, each one equally plausible. The ambiquity of the words "sheet" and "worm" is the cause of the uncertainty. If emphasis is placed on "tomb", the sheet becomes Thomas' shroud and the worm the coffin worm which will devour him. If "lover" instead of "tomb" receives the emphasis, the sheet suggests bed linen and the "crooked worm" becomes an emblem of the sinister phallus which begets death while engendering life. Finally, since the last two lines (like the last two lines of every stanza) seem to represent Thomas' thoughts as a poet, the sheet may be a piece of paper and the "crooked worm" the bent forefinger which holds the pencil yet which betrays his efforts to express his feelings in words. In each interpretation, however, the word "worm" functions as a symbol of destruction, although the agent of this destruction may be death, sex or the frustrations inherent in writing poetry.

The intent of this thesis is to examine the two major categories into which Dylan Thomas' images seem to fall: images associated with creation and images associated with destruction.

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PART I

IMAGES ASSOCIATED WITH CREATION

CHAPTER I: THE WOMB, THE FORCE, AND THE LINK BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE

The sea, Thomas' most frequently used image,[11] serves as a metaphor for the womb which "shapes all her whelps with a long voice of water."[12] The "whelps" found in the sea, however, may be human fetuses in the maternal womb or poems taking shape in the "womb of the mind" (*i.e.*, the creative imagination).

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[11] Of the forty four poems examined in the preparation of this thesis, twenty seven of them contained references to the sea. In each of these poems, the sea served one or more of the functions cited in this chapter. Since nearly all of the images discussed later in this thesis are associated with the sea, only a brief resume of the sea's thematic functions and a few illustrations of each use will be provided in this chapter. Passages of poetry containing images treated elsewhere in this paper are footnoted and a cross reference provided.

[12] "A Grief Ago", *Collected Poems* (hereafter designated as *C P*), p. 12.

There is little doubt that the embryo of "A Saint About to Fall" is a human child, however, for Thomas wrote this poem in anticipation of the birth of his son Colm.[13] Just before his "fall" from the womb into the world of experience, the fetus, or "saint" praises "the vanishing of the musical shipwork and the chucked bells" which have kept him amused while in the amniotic sea.[14] After his birth, the life-giving corpuscles ("fish-gilled boats bringing blood") search the "scuttled sea" for some sign of the departed child. On the other hand, the creature found in the seas of "When Once The Twilight Locks No Longer" seems to be a poem rather than a human embryo. Thomas writes:

> When the galactic sea was sucked
> And all the dry seabed unlocked,
> I sent my creature scouting on the glove,
> That glove itself of hair and bone
> That, sewn to me by nerve and brain,
> Had stringed my flask of matter to his rib.

The narrator of the poem is apparently either the Divine Afflatus or Thomas' creative imagination. The "creature" is the idea for a poem. This creature, the creator remembers, was suckled in a "galactic sea," a womb as cosmic as the galaxy and as maternal as a mother's lactic

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[13]Tindall, p. 170.

[14]For Submerged bells see Part I, Chapter II.

breasts. After the idea is "born," the womb becomes dry and the creator, like God creating Adam, sends his creature "scouting on the globe." Since this "globe" is made of "hair and bone" and is attached to the narrator by "nerve and brain," it probably represents Thomas' skull, or more exactly, his critical intellect. The duty of this "globe" is to provide form and structure for the poem and yet maintain the original creative impulse. Apparently the mission was successful, for the God-like creator says that his own essence, his "flask of matter," is firmly attached to the creature's rib.

The presence of seaweed in the sea serves to emphasize the womb's fertility. The infant narrator of "Where Once the Waters of Your Face," happy that his recent birth has not brought permanent sterility to the womb, says:

> Invisible, your clocking tides
> Break on the lovebeds of the weeds.

Occasionally, seaweed serves as a metaphor for the umbilicus, as in "I, In My Intricate Image," in which the "triton (possibly both a human embryo and an allusion to Wordsworth's majestic figure of poetry personified) dangles in the sea by means of a "flaxen whaleweed." In at least one poem, Thomas seems to use seaweed as an emblem for the fetus itself. Alluding to the old maxim "all flesh is grass," the rejected lover of "Not From This Anger" bitterly mutters:

> Not from this anger, anticlimax after
> Refusal struck her loin and the lame flower[15]
> Bent like a beast ...
> . . . .
> Shall she receive a bellyful of weeds.

Birth causesthe womb to become vacant and the sea to dry up. The "creature" of "When Once the Twilight Locks No Longer" leaves behind him a "dry sea bed unlocked," a "sucked" galactic sea. Similarly, the newly born narrator of "Where Once the Waters of Your Face," thinking of the womb he has just left, sadly muses:

> Where once the water of your face
> Spun to my screws, the dry ghost blows,[16]
> The dead turns up its eye;
> Where once the mermen through your ice
> Pushed up their hair, the dry wind steers
> Through salt and root and roe.[17]

The vacant womb with its dry winds, ghosts, and corpses presents a deathly picture, but Thomas seems equally appalled by the fertile womb which produces death and life simultaneously. In "I See the Boys of Summer," Thomas exhorts his cohorts, the "boys of summer already in their ruin," to summon:

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[15] For Flowers see Part I, Chapter II

[16] For Ghosts see Part II, Chapter I

[17] For Salt as a symbol of life, see Part I, Chapter III; for salt as a symbol of sterility, see Part II, Chapter III.

Death from a summer woman,
A muscling life from lovers in their cramp,
From the fair dead who flush the sea
The bright-eyed worm on Davy's lamp,[18]
And from the planted womb the man of straw.

The "fair dead" apparently are living embryos who "flush" from the teeming "summer" woman's womb two symbols of death: a coffin worm and an Eliotesque straw man. Even more grisly are the progeny who issue from the sepulchral womb in "When Once the Twilight Locks No Longer":

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;

Although the womb-as-tomb motif dominates Thomas' early work, the sea also occasionally serves as an agent of rebirth and resurrection. "Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again",Thomas says of the dead in "And Death Shall Have No Dominion." Even the deathly womb of "When Once the Twilight Locks No Longer" eventually re-assumes its creative potential and offers up its "shades," or embryos, for rebirth:

Sleep navigates the tides of time;
The dry Sargasso of the tomb
Gives up its dead to such a working sea;
And sleep rolls mute above the beds
Where fishes food is fed the shades
Who periscope through flowers to the sky.

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[18] For <u>Worms</u> see Part II, Chapter I.

As in this last poem, the sky (and sun) often serves in Thomas' poetry as goals to which the newly born or reborn creatures must aspire. Since the sea serves as womb and tomb of both human fetuses and poems, sun and sky usually represents adulthood and artistic realization. The creator of the embryonic poem in "When Once the Twilight Locks No Longer," says:

> My fuses timed to charge his heart;
> He blew like powder to the light
> And held a little sabbath with the sun.

In "A Grief Ago," it is the embryo who informs its mother that she must recall her mortal children to the womb before the "suncock" (or phoenix) will ascend to its pyre and bring resurrection:

> I tell her this: before the suncock cast
> Her bone to fire,
> Let her inhale her dead, through seed and solid
> Draw in their seas,

The dreamer who narrates "I Dreamed My Genesis," another poem about death and rebirth, is most probably Thomas himself. His nightmare of a death by shrapnel reminds the dreamer of the traumatic experience of birth ("I ...died again") and possibly, considering the reference to Adam, of mankind's fall which brought death into the world. Again the sea, now stale with the sweat and tears of mankind, serves as the agent of rebirth and the sun is the symbol of the new apocalypse:[19]

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[19] Tindall, p. 70.

I dreamed my genesis and died again, shrapnel
Rammed in the marching heart, hole
In the stitched wound and clotted wind, muzzled
Death on the mouth that ate gas.

Sharp in my second death I marked the hills, harvest
Of hemlock and the blades, rust
My blood upon the tempered dead, forcing
My second struggling from the grass.

. . . .

I dreamed my genesis in sweat of death, fallen
Twice in the feeding sea, grown
Stale of Adam's brine until, vision[20]
Of new man strength, I seek the sun.

Oil is the image Thomas uses most frequently to represent the flow of procreative energy. "In the Beginning," a poem celebrating the creation, describes the dawning of life in the womb/sea of the cosmos and the function of oil in this event:

In the beginning was the mounting fire
That set alight the weathers from a spark,
A three-eyed, red-eyed spark, blunt as a flower,[21]
Life rose and spouted from the rolling seas,
Burst in the roots, pumped from earth and rock
The secret oils that drive the grass.

---

[20]For Adam see Part I, Chapter III.

[21]Red-eyed, or bright-eyed, is a phrase which Thomas associates with both the creative spark of life (as in this poem) and with the sinister advance of death. C F. "the broken ghosts with glow-worms in their heads" ("Light Breaks Where No Sun Shine,""C P, p. 29) and "the bright-eyed worm on Davy's lamp" ("I See the Boys of Summer," C P, p. 2).
For flowers, see Part I, Chapter III.

Oil functions as the energy of life in "Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines" also, but in this poem the oil gushes down from the sky instead of up from the sea. This poem also differs from "In the Beginning" in that the entity being created is not the universe but a human embryo experiencing the impulse of life at the moment of its conception:

> Dawn breaks behind the eyes;
> From poles of skull and toe the windy blood
> Slides like a sea;
> Nor fenced, nor staked, the gushers of the sky
> Spout to the rod
> Divining in a smile the oil of tears.

The "rod" is apparently an allusion to the phallus which sired the embryo. Like a divining rod, the phallus probes for life, and like Aaron's divine rod which brought forth water from a rock, it brings forth life-giving oil from the "gushers of the sky."[22] "Divining" also possibly refers to the embryo's foreknowledge of his ultimate death[23] and his awareness that life will be a mixture of smiles and tears.

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[22]Tindall, p. 64.

[23]Embryos conceived with a foreknowledge of death are frequent subjects of Thomas' early poetry. Often, these prescient embryos serve as the narrators of the poems in which they appear (*e.g.* "Before I Knocked," *C.P.* pp. 8-9, and "If I Were Tickled By the Rub of Love" *C.P.* pp. 13-15).

Not only can oil create life, it can also revive a sterile wasteland. In "All All and All the Dry Worlds Lever" Thomas paints a bleak picture of contemporary society, describing it as a "stage of ice," and a "solid (and hence sterile) ocean." However, should what Lawrence called "blood knowledge" replace traditional social values in the public conscience, then:

> Out of the sea, the drive of oil,
> Socket and grave, the brassy blood,
> Flower, flower, all all and all.

Weather, like _sea_ and _oil_, is also associated with the workings of the omnipotent life force. However, whereas the sea is almost invariably an emblem of the womb (or womb as tomb) and oil usually suggests the creative energy inherent in the life force, _weather_ can function in a number of ways. Occasionally, as in "In the Beginning," weather seems to represent the natural processes of life which were set into motion at the Creation:

> In the beginning was the mounting fire
> That set alight the weathers of the spark,

More often, however, _weather_ serves as a predator of man sent by the cosmic law which controls all of life, or as an intermediary between man and external nature, both of which are at the mercy of the creative-destructive life principle. In "Hold Hand These Ancient Minutes of the Cuckoo's Month" _weather_ becomes a beastial composite of the four seasons

hunting down the children who, like the child of "Fern Hill," are green and dying:

> Down fall four padding weathers on the scarlet
>   lands,
> Stalking my children's faces with a trail of
>   blood,
> Time, in a rider rising, from the harnassed
>   valley

The weather teaches the narrator of "Here In This Spring" that the laws of life and death which govern nature also control his own destiny. Although in this poem, _weather_ is not pictured as the malevolent agressor which it was in "Hold Hard These Ancient Minutes of the Cuckoo's Month," the message it brings is equally frightening:

> Here in this spring, stars float along the void;
> Here in this ornamental winter
> Down pelts the naked weather;
> This summer buries a spring bird.

Often _weather_ is intended to represent not the natural environment but rather the "inner climate" of the human body. Thomas was obsessed with the natural processes which, linking man and nature, revolved around the axis of life and death.[24] _Weather_ is the image he most often emplys to suggest this link between man and universe. The narrator of "I See the Boys of Summer" realizes that the weathers of the womb in which the "summer children" play

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[24]Tindall, pp. 34-35.

are analogous to the natural processes which will eventually destroy them. The light of day they see when they are born will signify the first stage of death; likewise, the sunlight of the womb "paints" the skulls beneath the skin of the embryos:

> I see the summer children in their mothers
> Split up the brawned womb's weathers,
> Divide the night and day with fairy thumbs;
> There in the deep with quartered shades
> Of sun and moon they paint their dams
> As sunlight paints the shelling of their heads.

Similarly, the embryo who narrates "A Process In the Weather of the Heart" realizes that the processes which govern the natural elements have created and will eventually destroy him also. External nature provides the manifestations of this life principle - the dampness and dryness, day and night - which the embryo, endowed with "blood knowledge," finds within himself:

> A process in the weather of the heart
> Turns damp to dry; the golden shot
> Storms in the freezing tomb.
> A weather in the quarter of the veins
> Turns night to day; blood in their suns
> Lights up the living worm.
>
> A process in the eye forwards
> The bones of blindness; and the womb
> Drives in a death as life leaks out.
>
> A darkness in the weather of the eye
> Is half its light; the fathomed sea
> Breaks on unangled land.
> The seed that makes a forest of the loin
> Forks half its fruit; and half drops down,
> Slow in a sleeping wind.

A weather in the flesh and bone
Is damp and dry; the quick and dead
More like two ghosts before the eye.

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

On several occasions, Thomas uses weather to indicate the overpowering forces of nature which elude his attempts to capture them in verse. In "How Shall My Animal," Thomas laments that his animal (i. e., the inspiration he receives from nature) should be subjected to such an ignominous end as being confined in words when it should be free to "quarrel" with the "weathers" of reality:

How shall my animal
Whose wizard shape I trace in the cavernous skull
. . . .
Endure burial under the spelling wall
. . . .
Who should be furious,
Drunk as a vineyard snail, flailed like an
octopus,
Roaring, crawling, quarrel
With the outside weathers,
The natural circle of the discovered skies
Drawn down to its weird eyes?

Thomas' attempts to vitalize his poetry with the same force he feels coursing through nature meet with more success in "I, In My Intricate Image," for he says his personified images:

> Climb the country pinnacle
> . . . .
> Counter the mounted meadow;
> They see . . .
> The haring snail go giddily round the flower,
> A quarrel of weathers and trees in a windy
>   spiral.

Climbing, like the movement from the womb toward the light, is a Freudian motif implying aspiration toward a goal of self-realization. In this poem, the goal to which Thomas' "intricate images" aspire is that of harmony with the life force as it is manifest in nature.[25] Their union with the trees, winds, and quarreling weathers suggests that their quest has been realized and Thomas, as their creator, has attained artistic fulfillment.

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[25]Actually, the twin images of "I, In My Intricate Image" represent not only Thomas' poetic images but Thomas himself as well. The images' ascension toward the sky, then, illustrate both the evolution of Thomas' poetry toward the status of true art and Thomas' own maturation as a poet. The latter theme, although not discussed in this section, is treated in the next chapter and elsewhere in this paper. (Tindall p. 79.)

CHAPTER II: THE POETIC/SEXUAL PHALLUS AND IMAGES ASSOCIATED WITH REBIRTH

Towers and spires abound in Dylan Thomas' early poetry and usually serve as imagistic metaphors for the implement which impregnates the womb with the creative-destructive life force. Often, as in the following excerpt from "The Seed-At-Zero," towers function as Freudian phallic symbols:

> The seed-at-zero shall not storm
> That town of ghosts, the trodden womb
> With her rampart to his tapping,
> No god-in-hero tumble down
> Like a tower on the town
> Dumbly and divinely stumbling
> Over the manwaging line.

In this poem mourning the sterility of the male (the "seed-at-zero:) and the barreness of the female womb (a "town of ghosts"), Thomas laments that some potent "god-in-hero" does not "storm" the womb with his tapping, "dumbly and divinely stumbling" phallus. By contrast, the embryo who narrates "A Grief Ago" laments the poetncy of the tower/phallus which conceived him:

> A grief ago,
> She who was who I hold, the fats and flower,
> Or, water-lammed, from the scythe-sided thorn,
> . . . .
> A stem cementing, wrestled up the tower,
> . . . .
> Sailed up the sun.

The woman referred to in this poem is apparently the embryo's mother whom he "holds" to be the "fats and flower," or the essence of abundance of life.[26] At some infamous time in the past,[27] the embryo recalls, his mother was "water-lammed" (*i.e.* impregnated) by a deadly "scythe-sided thorn."[28] The thorn, affixed to a cementing (*i.e.* *sementing*) stem, could not beget the moribund embryo, however, until after it had "wrestled up" the father's phallic tower. As with much of Thomas' poetry, womb is tomb, and the phallic tower destroys what it creates.

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[26]Tindall, p. 106.

[27]*Grief* often serves Thomas as a synonym for *Time*. *See* Part II, Chapter III.

[28]The mother's "sailing up the sun" in the last line evidently refers to the moment at which her "water-lammed" womb conceived a son. Thomas often uses *sun* for *son*, primarily in those poems in which the embryonic narrator (usually an unborn poet) identifies with Christ. As Christ was the Son and the light of the World, so the embryonic poet is his own father's son/sun, and as a creator in his own right, is destined to enlighten the world with his verse. "A Grief Ago" is replete with Christian allusions (e.g., Aaron's rod, the Garden of Eden, etc.) although only the deadly thorn is mentioned in the stanza quoted in the text of this chapter. (Tindall, p. 106-107).

Occasionally, towers serve Thomas as Yeatsian towers of art - symbols of poetry and the poetic impulse. "Birds and shell are babbling in my tower," exclaims the embryonic poet of "Do You Not Father Me." Similarly, the adolescent poet of "Altar-wise By Owlight" Sonnet VI works by candle light to perfect his craft until finally he says "...tallow I blew from the wax tower."[29] Most often, however, Thomas combines the phallic and artistic characteristics of his towers. The structures (usually spires or steeples) retain their phallic overtones, but the embryos they sire are an indistinguishable mixture of human flesh and poetry.[30] These human/poetic fetuses are often represented as bells, and as such suggest both a diver in a diving bell and the musical bells of poetry.[31]

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[29]When associated with writing poetry, _candles_ usually serve as creative symbols with phallic overtones. In Sonnet VI, _candles_ are identified as a "wick of words"; therefore, blowing tallow from the "wax tower" seems to represent writing down the poem which the candle/phallus originated. Oddly, when Thomas associates _candles_ with sexual creation, they, like towers, are as destructive as they are creative. (_See_ Part II, Chapter I)

[30]Like Thomas' substitution of _sun_ for _son_ (or _Son_), this fusion of poem and child seems to result from the similarity Thomas saw between poets and Christ. Christ was the Word Made Flesh, and the embryos sired by the phallic/poetic steeple are words-as-flesh. As might be expected, the human "half" of the embryo is usually an embryonic poet. (Tindall, p. 9).

[31]Thomas regularly associates metal with mortal flesh. _See_ Part II, Chapter II.

In "I, In My Intricate Image," the "Twin Miracles" (Thomas' poetic images and his own projected double who serves as the _persona_ of the poem) dive from a "country pinnacle" into the regenerative womb of their creator. Since the images are both poetic and human, the sea would seem to represent both the _anima_ and the material womb. Before being reborn as authentic art and mature man, however, the images must first enter the tomb. Thus diving becomes a metaphor for dying, womb becomes tomb, and the phallic/poetic tower sires deathly progeny:

> As they drown, the chime travels,
> Sweetly the diver's bell in the steeple of
>   spindrift;
> Rings out the Dead Sea scale;
> And clapped in water till the triton dangles,
> Strung by the flaxen whalweed, from the
>   hangman's raft,
> Hear they the salt glass breakers and the
>   tongues of burial.

As mentioned previously, the diver's bell suggests both a human fetus and, since it emits chimes, a poem as well. Womb is tomb, however, and so the song that the bell rings out is the Dead Sea scale. Equally deathly are the glass-breaking waves, the triton (evidently another embryonic poet and/or poem) dangling by a whaleweed umbilicus attached to a hangman's raft, and the tongues whispering of burial. This watery tomb becomes womb again in Part II of "I, In My Intricate Image," and the deathly tower becomes a symbol of resurrection:

They suffer the undead[32] water where the turtle
    nibbles,
Come unto sea-stuck towers, at the fibre
    sealing,
The flight of the carnal skull
And the cell-stepped thimble;
Suffer, my topsy-turvies, that a double angel
Sprout from the stony lockers like a tree[33]
    on Aran.

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[32]Undead is a word which Thomas frequently uses to mean death in life. See Part II, Chapter IV.

[33]Thomas almost invariably associates trees with poetry or with the growth and flowering of poems and poets. Leaves and fruit usually represent the poems themselves. His frequently used poet-as-Christ metaphor seems to be involved here also, for the wooden cross was the cause of Christ's suffering, and poetry was the cross Thomas had to bear. In the seventh "Altar-wise By Owlight" sonnet, Thomas the poet as Christ the Word exhorts himself to "...stamp the Lord's prayer on a grain of rice,/A Bible-leaved of all the written words/Strip to this tree: A rocking alphabet /... /And one light's language in the book of trees" (C P, P. 83). Trees also serve as explicit metaphors for poems in the "Author's Prologue" to Collected Poems:

At poor peach I sing
To you strangers (though song
Is a burning and crested act,
The fire of birds in the world's turning
    wood,
For my sawn, splay sounds),
Out of these seathumbed leaves
That will fly and fall
Like leaves of trees and as soon
Crumble and undie.

(C P xv-xvi)

Still suffering in the "undead" womb-as-tomb, the twin images come upon "sea-stuck towers." Sunken bells ring from these towers, but "carnal skull" and "thimble" seem to make these towers phallic as well as poetic. "Scaling" could refer to the ringing of the "fibre" bells or to the shedding of the outer layers of the tower - an action which anticipates the process of rebirth which the images are to undergo. Thomas himself, realizing that an intensification of despair must precede resurrection, exhorts his "topsy-turvy" embryonic corpses to suffer. Their "double angel" (_i.e._ mature art and adult man) will then ascend from the deathly sea like a tree sprouting on the barren Aran Islands.[34]

Sunken towers and submerged bells occur in several other of Thomas' early poems. As in "I, In My Intricate Image," the towers and bells are associated with the birth, or rebirth of a poem and/or a poet. In "It Is the Sinner's Dust-Tongued Bell" two "divers" descend into the sea, and Thomas writes:

> Moonfall and sailing emperor, pale as their
>   tide-print,
> Hear by death's accident the clocked and
>   dashed-down spire
> Strike the sea hour through bellmetal.

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[34]Tindall, p. 84.

The "sailing emperor" apparently refers to the sun, which to Thomas meant Son, or Christ, the Emperor and Light of the World who leaves "tide-prints" on the water. "Moon-fall," the other diver, also leaves "prints" on the water as she controls the natural and maternal tides in the sea/womb.[35] In the womb, turned tomb by the "accident" of death, the two divers hear the "dashed-down spires" toll the hour through "bellmetal." Again, metal bells suggest both human embryos and poems. Although the numerous "conflicting" images only imply the nature of the ritual being acted out, the presence of sea, sun, the Son, poems, embryos, maternal moon, and masculine spire all seem to suggest that the omnipotent, deadly and creative Life Force is certainly central to the celebration. Again, Thomas' obsession with the whole cosmic process of birth and death is the cause of this ambiguity; however, the procreative nature of the celebration is confirmed in the last lines as Thomas writes, ". . .the plagued groom and bride/. . .have brought forth the urchin grief."

Although the spire of "The Spire Cranes" is not located underwater, it still serves as one of the best examples of Thomas' use of a tower to represent a poetic/sexual phallus:

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[35]Thomas occasionally associates moonlight with poetic inspiration. In the "Author's Prologue" he refers to himself as the "... moonshine/Drinking Noah of the bay." (C P xviii). In addition, Thomas occasionally uses nocturnal creatures such as foxes and owls to represent the sagacious poet, and fox-light and owl-light to indicate the light of inspiration which motivates the poet.

> The spire cranes. Its statue is an aviary,
> From the stone rest it does not let the
>   feathery
> Carved birds blunt their striking throats
>   on the salt gravel,
> Pierce the spilt sky with diving wing in
>   weed and heel
> An inch in froth. Chimes cheat the prison
>   spire, pelter
> In time like outlaw rains on that priest,
>   water,
> Time for the swimmer's hands, music for
>   silver lock
> And mouth. Both note and plume plunge from
>   the spire's hook.

In the excerpt quoted above, the spire takes care not to sow its "seed" on "salt gravel" but rather releases the birds and chimes to plunge into the "spilt sky" or water.[36] Bells, as usual, may be the seeds of either human fetuses or poems; "carved," "feathery" and "throat" suggest that the birds, like the bells, are poetic as well as sexual seeds.[37] Unlike "I, In My Intricate Image"

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[36]At first reading, it would seem that the birds were kept imprisoned by the spire whereas the chimes escaped. This confusion is caused by the implied nor after the third line (i.e. "... it does not let the .../ Carved birds blunt their striking throats on the salt gravel [nor] /Pierce the spilt sky ...."). However, since Thomas says "Both note and plume plunge from the spire's hook," it seems more likely that but rather should be inserted after the third line.

[37]Tindall, p. 158. Birds (like foxes, dogs, owls, insects, and trees), especially the phoenix or other firy birds, occasionally serve as metaphors for poems or poets. In the "Author's Prologue" Thomas says his song "Is a burning and crested act, /The fire of birds in the world's turning wood." Also, in "I Make This In A Warring

and "It Is the Sinner's Dust-Tongued Bell," this poem deals solely with the creative potential of the life force as it acts equally on mind and body.

Like towers, flowers often appear in Dylan Thomas' early poetry as Freudian phallic symbols. The "scythe-sided thorn" which wrestled up a "cementing stem" in "A Grief Ago" has already been mentioned as one example of a flowers serving as a phallus. Flower also becomes phallus in "Not From This Anger," but in this poem sexual union is thwarted by the woman's frigidity:

> Not from this anger, anticlimax after
> Refusal struck her loin and the lame flower
> Bent like a beast to lap the singular floods
> In a land strapped by hunger
> Shall she receive a bellyful of weeds.

Although "lamed" by the woman's refusal, the flower's beastial potency and its ability to engender, if given a chance, a "bellyful of weeds" is still evident.

The bud of the flower held special sexual significance for Thomas not only because of its phallic shape but also because it is the bud which eventually develops into a bloom. The adolescent boy of "If I Were Tickled by the Rub of Love", torn between lust and his fears of sex, describes his confused world as:

Absence," Thomas says he "Fumed like a tree and tossed a burning bird," after regaining his poetic skills lost during a quarrel with Caitlin.

> ... half the devil's and my own,
> Daft with the drug that's smoking in a girl
> And curling round the bud that forks her eye.

Fearful of sex, the young boy realizes that his own sexuality has aroused the girl whom he both wants and fears.

Flower buds also serve as images of the deadly phallus which creates life and death impartially and simultaneously. The embryo narrator of "When, Like a Running Grave" comes to the conclusion that joy is no more than a "dusty" death, and that Adam's "bud" gave rise not only to mankind but also to the walking corpse, Cadaver:

> Joy is the knock of dust, Cadaver's[38] shoot
> Of bud of Adam[39]....

Similarly, the sexual act (as the embryo "remembers" it) takes on the violent aura of a 1930's gangster movie shoot-out in "A Grief Ago." Father becomes the "fingerman"; phallus becomes Aaron's rod; and sperm becomes a bullet, a "leaden bud," which kills as it impregnates.

> Wrenched by my fingerman, the leaden bud
> Shot through the leaf,
> ... folded on the rod [of] Aaron

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[38] Cadaver, like "undead," is a symbol of death-in-life. See Part II, Chapter II.

[39] Adam is usually associated with genesis and the origin of life. See Part I, Chapter III.

Flowers also function as images of rebirth or resurrection, especially when found atop graves. In "And Death Shall Have No Dominion," Thomas, speaking of the dead, says, "Though they be mad and dead as nails, /Heads of the characters hammer through daisies." Likewise, the deathly embryos of "When Once the Twilight Locks No Longer," once revived by the "working sea" of the tomb-become-womb, " . . .periscope through flowers to the sky." A flower (or to be more specific, a fern) becomes a metaphor for renewed faith and revitalized poetic creativity in "After the Funeral." Staring at the tombstone which marks the grave of his Aunt Ann Jones, Thomas muses:

> These cloud-sopped, marble hands, this
>   monumental
> Argument of the hewn voice, gesture and psalm,
> Storm me forever over her grave until
> The stuffed lung of the fox twitch and cry Love
> And the strutting fern lay seeds on the
>   black sill.

Like the stale fern which regains its fertility, Thomas will be inspired by his Aunt's death to "twitch" his "foxy" poet's lungs and create new poems of life and love.[40]

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[40] In "Peaches," the opening chapter of Portrait of the Artist As A Young Dog, Thomas mentions that a stuffed fox and a fern-pot actually were located in Ann Jones' parlor. That Thomas also associates foxes with poets and flowers with rebirth seems to be a happy coincidence of symbol and reality.

Although usually associated with death and the past,[41] Egyptian culture also provides Thomas with two of his most frequently used images of the tomb as womb: pyramids and mummies. Usually the mummy/embryo is that of a poet, experiencing death in the womb in order to write poetry about the Life Force. In addition, a pyramid seems to be an especially appropriate womb for a poet of wombs and tombs because the heiroglyphics which usually adorn the pyramids' walls have often been interpreted as ancient attempts to explain the mysteries of life and death. Even if the heiroglyphics are indecipherable, however, their intricate designs make the burial vault a veritable palace of art.[42]

The embryo who narrates "My World is Pyramid" eventually ends up affirming life, but first he experiences death in the womb-as-pyramid:

> My world is pyramid. The padded mummer
> Weeps on the desert ochre and the sale
> Incising summer.
> My Egypt's armour buckling in its sheet,
> I scrape through resin to a starry bone
> And a blood parhelion.

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[41]For Egypt as a symbol of the past and the in sience of life, See Part II, Chapter III.

[42]Tindall, p. 73.

Encased in metal like most of Thomas' mortal embryos, the narrator is also wrapped in his funeral shroud like a mummy. However, the parhelion which he uncovers in the tomb is by definition a mock image or ghost of the sun. Since this parhelion is made of blood, the ghostly sun becomes a mortal ghost of the Son, or Christ awaiting resurrection from the tomb.[43]

A pyramid also serves as both the tomb and womb of Thomas himself in "I Make This in Warring Absence. Robbed of his poetic skills by a quarrel with his wife Caitlin,[44] Thomas writes:

> Ruin, the room of errors, one rood dropped
> Down the stacked sea and water-pillared shade,
> Weighed in rock shroud, is my proud pyramid;
> Where, wound in emerald linen and sharp wind,
> The hero's head is scraped of every legend.

Thomas' "ruin," as a husband and a poet, is described as a "room of errors" and a "proud pyramid." The walls of his pyramid are his "rock shroud," and wrapped in emerald linen, he lies like a mummy, his head "scraped" of the

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[43] Ibid.

[44] Written a few months after Dylan and Caitlin Thomas were married, this poem was originally entitled "Poem to Caitlin" and then "Poem (for Caitlin)" (Tindall, p. 147).

"legends" of poetry. However, the pyramind's location in the sea and the presence of a "sharp wind" (both the breath of life and the Divine Afflatus), at least hint that the pyramid may become womb and Thomas may be reborn as a poet. This speculation becomes fact in the next stanza of the poem, for Thomas' resurrection begins, ominously enough, with the cry of "inchtaped lips":

> 'His mother's womb had a tongue that
> lapped up mud,'
> Cried the topless, inchtaped lips from hank
> and hood
> In that bright anchorground where I lay
> linened,
> 'A lizard darting with black venon's thread
> Doubled, to fork him back, through the
> lockjaw bed
> And the breath-white, curtained mouth of seed.'
> 'See,' drummed the taut masks, 'how the dead
> ascend:
> In the groin's endless coil a man is tangled.'

The "inchtaped lips" crying from "hank and hood" are apparently those of another mummy lying in the same vault in which Thomas lies wrapped in linen. This other mummy's lips are deathly since inch and tape are both types of worms. The message that these lips cry out - that Thomas' "mother's womb had a tongue that lapped up mud" - is equally deathly.

The darting, lizard-like tongue is apparently Thomas' own tongue which is responsible in part for his present condition. His venemous counter attacks on his wife, the mummy tells him, have only widened the gulf between Caitlin and him and forced him to his sickbed with the poet's disease, "lockjaw." Even worse, his pride (the "proud pyramid" of the first stanza) has drawn down the "breath white" curtain on his "mouth of seed," or his poetic imagination, and made writing poetry impossible.

In the midst of this deathly setting, however, a mask sounds a note of promise: even from the groin's deathly coil (possibly the umbilicus or the entanglements of life), the "dead ascend." Inspired by the mask's proclamation, Thomas announces his resurrection as a poet in the next stanza:

> These once-blind eyes have breathed a wind of visions;
> The cauldron's roots through this once-rindless hand
> Fumed like a tree, and tossed a burning bird.

CHAPTER III: OTHER IMAGES ASSOCIATED WITH THE CREATIVE PHASE OF THE LIFE FORCE

Besides associating certain images with specific aspects of creation (i.e. the sea with the womb; towers with the phallus, etc.), Dylan Thomas also uses several images as what may be called general life symbols. Unlike the images covered in the first two chapters of this paper, these life symbols do not have a specific and consistent metaphorical reference. However, these images recur frequently in poems or portions of poems which emphasize the creative potential of the Life Force and thus gradually accumulate symbolic value.

Roses often seem to suggest the creative and life-sustaining aspects of the Life Force, primarily because Thomas tends to contrast them with themes and images of death and mortality. For example, the narrator of "Find Meat On Bones," a fatalistic, bitter old man, tells his son to make the most of life for even the "merriest marrow" and the loveliest breasts are doomed to death and decay. Furthermore, the father warns the boy that when confronted with death, he must:

"Disturb no winding sheet, my son,
But when the ladies are cold as stone
Then hang a ram rose[45] over the rags."

Hanging a rose on a dead lover's shroud and then walking away is the old man's cynical way of acclaiming life. The rose, as his emblem, celebrates the living as it mocks the dead.

A rose serves as a symbol suggesting immortality and the creative potential in "I, In My Intricate Image." The narrator is a poet who hopes to produce a Yeatsian "monument to unaging intellect" by a fusion of "rose and male motion":

Beginning with doom in the ghost, and the
  springing marvels,
Image of images, my metal phantom
Forcing forth through the harebell,
My man of leaves and the bronze root,
  mortal, unmortal,
I, in my fusion of rose and male motion,
Create this twin miracle.

The "miracle" that results from the "fusion of rose and male motion" is "twin," or double in two respects. "Metal phantom" and "harebell" invoke Thomas' metal-as-flesh metaphor and thus make the "miracle" a human as well as a poetic creation. Since Thomas also often uses trees as metaphors for poems, "man of leaves" and "bronze root"

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[45] _Ram rose_ is possibly a shortened form of _Rambling rose_. _Ram_ also suggests the brutish hedonism that the old man advocates as a way of life for his son.

likewise suggest a union of flesh and poetry. "Male motion," then, suggests not only the physical exertion of the male during sexual intercourse but also the mental effort a poet expends on the masculine artistic principle of structuring and writing down his poems. "Rose," since it evidently stands in opposition to "male motion," implies maternal receptivity and the feminine, creative principle of art.

Besides being both human and poetic, the "twin miracle" is "mortal, unmortal," or inside of time and yet outside of it. Images reminiscent of Yeats "Byzantium," such as "image of images," "phantom," and "mortal, unmortal," suggest the spiritual qualities of this creation; "doom in the ghost" and "male motion" imply its temporal, mortal nature. "Rose", again by virtue of its opposition to "male motion," becomes a symbol of the immortal, transcendental aspects of Thomas' "twin miracle."

The biblical figure _Adam_ also functions as a symbol of the genesis of spiritual and/or phsical life in the early poetry of Dylan Thomas. When associated with the sea, _Adam_ suggests the original source of life or a means of rebirth. In "I, In My Intricate Image," the sea/womb which gives birth to the "twin miracle" of poet and poem is called "green Adam's cradle." Similarly, the sea which rejuvenates a disillusioned Thomas in "A Grief Ago" is filled with "Adam's brine."

Adam also appears in Thomas' poems as a representation of the prototype of mankind. The "gentleman of wounds" in

the first "Altarwise By Owl-light" sonnet is a mere remnant of the original, a "hangnail cracked from Adam." Likewise, the embryo of "My World is Pyramid" evidently has Adam to thank for at least part of his heredity, since Thomas writes:

> Half of the fellow father as he doubles
> His sea-sucked Adam in the hollow hulk;

According to Elder Olson, half of the embryo, the "sea-sucked Adam," comes from the father as he creates within the womb's "hollow hulk" an image of himself. However, the father is himself an image of Adam, the archetypal ancestor created by the original genesis of life within the cosmic womb. Hence, the embryo is a double (i.e. doubled or duplicated) image of Biblical Adam.[46]

Adam also occasionally appears in Thomas' poetry as a phallic symbol. The embryo who narrates "When Like a Running Grave" unhappily concludes that the joy of sexual intercourse (and of the life which it engenders) is nothing more than "... the knock of dust, Cadaver's shoot/Of bud of Adam ...." The fifth "Altarwise By Owl-light" sonnet also provides an example of Adam as phallus. The sonnet opens with the young persona (possibly Thomas himself as a child) posing as "two-gunned Gabriel" from the windy west.

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[46]Olson, p. 99.

Childhood fantasy soon gives way to adolescent sexual awakening, however, and the boy suddenly realizes that his first sexual erection has meant banishment from the world of his childhood:

> Rose my Byzantine Adam in the night.
> For loss of blood I fell on Ishmael's plain,
> Under the milky mushrooms slew my hunger,
> A climbing sea from Asia had me down
> And Jonah's Moby snatched me by the hair.

Deprived of his childhood innocence, the adolescent boy, like Biblical Ishmael, becomes an outcast. Still drawn to the "milky mushrooms," or his mother's breasts, he now discovers that the attraction his mother holds for him threatens his newly discovered sense of independence and masculine sexuality. This Freudian identity crisis is made explicit in the next two lines, as the boy finds himself trapped by a menacing womb image - a "climbing sea from Asia." Fortunately, "Jonah's Moby," a fusion of male phallic symbol and the fish which delivered the banished Jonah from destruction, rescues the struggling adolescent. Adam, whose "ascension" instigated this crisis, seems to represent phallic erection and the concomitant awakening of the young boy's sexual consciousness. In addition, since the young boy is very possibly Thomas himself, the allusion to Byzantium may be intended to herald the arrival of a new poet who will equal or surpass Yeats.[47] At any rate,

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[47] Tindall, pp. 134-135.

Adam seems to represent the stimulus which leads the young boy to discover within himself sexual and/or artistic prowess.

Two of Thomas' frequently used images - salt and sand - function as both life and death symbols.[48] Like roses and Adam, these images gain symbolic import from the context in which they occur.

When found in the sea, salt usually suggests genesis or fertility. The womb of "Where Once the Waters of Your Face" is made fertile by "salt and root and roe." Likewise, a sea filled with Adam's salty brine brings renewed hope and spiritual rebirth in "A Grief Ago." In "My World is Pyramid," salt serves as a nautical metaphor for an embryo about to be conceived:

> Half of the fellow[49] father as he doubles
> His sea-sucked Adam in the hollow hulk,
> Half of the fellow mother as she dabbles
> Tomorrow's diver in her horny milk,
> Bisected shadows on the thunder's bone
> Bolt for the salt unborn.

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[48]For salt and sand as images associated with death, degeneracy, and intransience, see Part II, Chapter III.

[49]Fellow, like fork, is a word Thomas uses frequently as either a noun or a verb. In "I Fellowed Sleep," (C.P. pp. 31-32) fellow represents the narrator's self image, his "ghostly other," on which he must pass judgment. In this same poem, the narrator is fellowed (i.e. accompanied) by the fellow of his mother, who encourages him to accept his role as an adult male. In "My World Is Pyramid", the "fellow father" and "fellow mother" apparently represent his parents' genetic assence or "shadows," which, when "doubled" by the sexual act, create the embryo. "Sea-sucked Adam," "Tomorrow's diver" and "the salt unborn" all apparently refer to this embryo. (See also, the discussion of Adam in this same chapter.)

Finally, salt seems to be a sign of human life in "Before I Knocked." The embryo who narrates this poem not only can forsee his life outside of the womb, but can also recall a blissful, pre-conception state of existence. However, once conception occurred, the embryo recalls, his existence as a perfect, immortal entity ceased and the "salt adventure" life as a human being-- began:

> And time cast forth my mortal creature
> To drift or drown upon the seas,
> Acquainted with the salt adventure
> Of tides that never touch the shores.

Like salt, sand is also associated with the genesis or nurture of life. The poet who narrates "When Once the Twilight Locks No Longer" says:

> When once the twilight screws were turned,
> And mother's milk was stiff as sand
> I sent my own ambassador to light.

In this instance, "stiff sand" serves as a metaphor for the creator's maternal breast which will provide the milk necessary to sustain the "ambassador" on his self-realizing trip toward the sun.

Sand seems to serve as an agent of the creative force itself in "From Love's First Fever to Her Plague". Describing his own development in the womb, the embryonic poet says:

> The body prospered, teeth in the marrowed gums,
> The growing bones, the rumor of manseed
> Within the hallowed gland, blood blessed the
>   heart,
> And the four winds that had long blown as one,

> Shone in my ears the light of sound,
> Called in my eyes the sound of light.
> And yellow was the multiplying sand,
> Each golden grain spat life into its fellow,
> Green was the singing house.

Even while still in the "singing house," or womb, the embryonic poet is capable of synesthesia as his seeing the "light of sound" and hearing the "sound of light" indicates. The yellow sand grains which multiply and "spit" life into each other may represent the cells of the developing embryo. However, since cells don't create life, it seems more likely that these fertile sand grains represent the spark of life itself. As with all of Thomas' general life symbols, the specific metaphorical reference of sand in this particular poem is difficult to determine. However, its frequent association with the genesis of life makes sand, as well as roses, salt, and Adam, a part of the body of images which Dylan Thomas most often associates with creation.

PART II

IMAGES ASSOCIATED WITH DESTRUCTION

CHAPTER I: THE DEADLY PHALLUS AND THE DEATHLY WOMB

Snakes appear often in Dylan Thomas' early poetry as images of the deadly phallus. Unlike other Thomas phallic symbols (*e.g.*, Towers and *Adam*), snakes never serve as emblems of poetic creativity nor do they ever suggest anything but the most disgusting and menacing aspects of sexual creation. For example, the embryo who narrates "My World Is Pyramid" says of the sexual act which created him:

> The patchwork halves were cloven as they scudded
> The wild pigs' wood, and slime upon the trees,
> Sucking the dark, kissed on the cyanide,
> And loosed the braiding adders from their hairs;

The first three lines of the excerpt present a vivid if disgusting picture of the sexual act. The "patchwork halves" evidently represent the embryo's parents since "patchwork" suggests the union of two differing things. "Adders," like "cyanide," suggests the mortal dangers forced upon the embryo at conception, for the conjunction of snakes and pubic hair evokes images of Medusa and her deadly glance.

Snakes also lurk in the womb described in "Where Once the Water of Your Face." The embryonic narrator warns his mother that even though her barren womb may become fertile, there will always be "serpents in your tides." Finally, sperm cells are compared with snakes in "Grief Thief of Time." Thomas tells us that:

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

And then adds:

> These stolen bubbles have the bites of snakes.

The bubbles in the seedy sack which time, the thief, has stolen seem to represent the sperm cells in the testicles. The victim of the robbery, Jack, is probably a collective personification of Thomas' ancestors or "father." Once in Time's deathly grasp, the "bubbles" become mortal and their "bite" becomes as deadly as an adder's sting.[50]

Like snakes, worms also often represent the deadly phallus which creates death as it engenders life. Found in the womb, worms suggest both phallus and coffin worm.[51] The

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[50]Tindall, p. 121. For _thieves_, see Part II, Chapter III.

[51]Thomas' most noted worm image, the "crooked worm" of "The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower," is discussed in the introduction to this thesis.

moment of conception "lights up the living worm" in "A Process in the Weather of the Heart," and the womb described in "Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines" is filled with:

> ... broken ghosts with glow-worms in their heads,
> The things of light, [which]
> File through the flesh where no flesh decks the bones.

Red-eyed or bright-eyed figures, especially worms, evidently held a sinister appeal for Thomas, for this image is repeated in "I See the Boys of Summer":

> ... let us summon
> Death from a summer woman,
> From the fair dead who flush the sea
> The bright-eyed worm on Davy's lamp.

The fetus who narrates "If My Head Hurt a Hair's Foot" is also concerned about the danger of a worm. However, the menacing worm of this poem seems to be the umbilicus rather than the phallus. Nor wishing his birth to cause his mother the slightest inconvenience, not even "hurt a hair's foot," the fetus says he would:

> Sooner drop with the worm of the ropes around my throat
> Than bully ill love on the clouted scene.

Thomas also occasionally uses candles as emblems of the deadly phallus. "A candle in the thighs/Warms youth and seed and burns the seeds of age," sadly muses the prescient pre-embryonic narrator of "Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines."

Likewise, the adult narrator of "When Like a Running Grave" is made aware of the brevity of life by the expanding and contracting of Cadaver's[52] phallic candle:

> When, like a running grave, time tracks you down
> . . . .
> Deliver me, my masters, head and heart, [for]
> Heart of Cadaver's candle waxes thin.

The deadly phallus sires moribund embryos, and these embryos are often pictured, predictably enough, as ghosts. A "ringed-sea ghost" haunts the fertile womb in "Do You Not Father Me," and "broken ghosts with glow-worms in their heads" parade through the womb described in "Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines." Equally ghostly is the barren womb pictured as a "Town of ghosts" in "The Seed at Zero." Finally, living and dead spirits become indistinguishable in "A Process in the Weather of the Heart" as "the quick and the dead/Move like two ghosts before the eye."

Implements associated with tailoring, especially scissors and knives, often suggest the birth-as-the-first-stage-of-death motif so prominent in Thomas' early poetry. Scissors cut the caul of the doomed fetus of "From Love's First Fever to Her Plague," and in another poem[53] Time "Comes like a scissors stalking, tailor age" to sever the Life

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[52]For Cadaver, see Part II, Chapter II.

[53]"When Like a Running Grave," C.P., pp. 21-23.

thread. Scissors and knives also figure in the birth process described in "Where Once the Waters of Your Face" as the newly born narrator, speaking to the womb he has just abandoned, says:

> Where once your green knots sank their splice
> Into the tided cord, there goes
> the green unraveller,
> His scissors oiled, his knife hung loose
> To cut the channels at their source
> And lay the wet fruits low.

The "green unraveller," a personification of the newness of birth, cuts the "tided cord" of the umbilicus and thus frees the "fruits" of the womb. However the knife dangling at his side and the phrase "lays low" reveal the sinister qualities of this birth. This fusion of birth and death and its association with tailoring is also evident in "Twenty-Four Years." The embryo, thinking of the moment of his birth, muses:

> In the groin of the natural doorway I
> crouched like a tailor
> Sewing a shroud for a journey
> By the light of the meat-eating sun.

CHAPTER II: "THE CORPSE INHERENT IN THE FLESH"

Cadaver, metal, wax, and maggots function in Dylan Thomas' early poetry as images of death-in-life, as reminders of what T. S. Eliot called the "skull beneath the skin."

The character of Cadaver is featured in "When Like a Running Grave." His waning phallic candle suggests the ultimate futility of life's struggles. "Cadaver's country" through which the young narrator walks is filled with repugnant sexual images, with "maiden's slime/ ... eunuchs, and the nitric stain on fork and face." As the narrator of "Fern Hill" discovers his childhood joys have forever fled, so the boy of "When Like a Running Grave" realizes that "Joy is the knock of dust, Cadaver's shoot of bud of Adam"

Cadaver also appears in "I, In My Intricate Image" and again seems to represent the deathly force in the midst of life:

> Man was Cadaver's masker, the harnessing mantle,
> Windily master of man was the rotten fathom.

Man is a "masker," a "harnessing mantle for deathly Cadaver. The "rotten fathom" - the sea/womb which Cadaver corrupts - is man's true master.

Metal (and metal-working implements) often serves as a metaphor for mortal flesh. Once encased in metal, man becomes:

> ... Cadaver's masker, the harnassing mantle,
> Windily master of man was the rotten fathom,
> My ghost in his metal neptune
> Forged in man's mineral.[54]

Human traits become the eccentricities of robots. The sexual act becomes a "stroke of mechanical flesh"[55] or a

> ... breaking
> Through the rotating shell, strong
> As motor muscle on the drill, driving
> Through vision and the girdered nerve.[56]

The phallus which sires the doomed infant is sometimes pictured as a bludgeoning blacksmith's hammer, wreaking destruction as it fosters life. The embryo of "Before I Knocked" remembers that at the moment of his conception he:

> Felt thud beneath my flesh's armor
> As yet was in molten form,
> The leaden stars, the rainy hammer
> Swung by my father from his dome.

Similarly, the narrator of "When Like a Running Grave" remembers his conception and relives the terrible moment:

> No, no, you lover skull, descending hammer
> Descends, ... on the entered honour.

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[54]"I, In My Intricate Image," C.P., pp. 40-44.

[55]"All All and All the Dry World's Lever," C.P., pp. 38-39.

[56]"I Dreamed My Genesis," C.P., pp. 33-34.

The hammer always descends in Thomas' poetry, however, and the infants thus sired:

> All issue armoured, of the grave,
> The redhaired cancer still alive.

Like metal, wax is also frequently associated with mortal flesh. "The force that drives the water through rocks/Drives my red blood," Thomas muses, but this same force "dries the mouthing streams [and] turns mine to wax." Here the Life Force becomes an embalmer's fluid, destroying life as it creates it. In "I, In My Intricate Image" the dual images of poem and persona are urged to remain in the sea/womb and thus avoid the "seawax struggle" - life as a fully realized poem or person - since this struggle can only end in their defeat.

Creativity, both sexual and poetic, is inhibited by the presence of wax. The pre-embryonic narrator of "Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines" muses:

> A candle in the thighs
> Warms youth and seed and burns the seeds of age;
> . . . .
> Where no wax is, the candle shows its hairs.

The phallic candle which invigorates the seed of the young eventually destroys the sexual potential of the old. However, if the candle were stripped of wax, the mortalizing element, the candle would apparently become strictly creative, since

only the wick ("hairs") actually produces the light of creativity.

Wax as an inhibiting factor of poetic creativity may be found in the sixth "Altarwise By Owl-Light" sonnet. The young poet/narrator finds his attempts to write torturous until finally he says:

> The bagpipe-breasted ladies in the deadweed
> Blew out the blood gauze through the wound
> of manwax.

Thomas' muses, the musical sirens, finally succeed in drawing poetry, his life's blood, from his soul, but not until the coarse "manwax" which has inhibited his spirit has been ripped open.

Whereas wax and metal suggest dying or dehumanized flesh, maggots seem to represent death itself. The narrator of "Before I Knocked" says that before he was even conceived he "smelt the maggot in my stool." Likewise, the cynical father of "Find Meat on Bones" pictures inexorable death as the "maggot no man can slay." Thomas' deathly maggot constantly lurks on the periphery of the happiest scenes. The "boys of summer" are in reality "man in his maggot's barren"; the dancers of "Was There a Time" are doomed because "Time has set its maggot on their track." In one poem, a maggot suggests an end that perhaps Thomas feared even more than death: posthumous disrepute or anonymity as a poet.

This fear is captured in "From Love's First Fever to Her Plague" in which a poet describes his maturation in terms of the development of an embryo:

> And from the first declension of the flesh
> I learnt man's tongue, to twist the shapes
>   of thoughts
> Into the stony idiom of the brain,...
> To shade and knit anew the patch of words
> Left by the dead who, in their moonless acre,
> Need no word's warmth
> The root of tongues ends in a spentout cancer,
> That but a name, where maggots have their X.

The "dead" refer to the great poets of the past, now deprived of their imagination ("moonless")[57] in the graveyard. Their tombstones serve as their only monument, and their epitaph, the illiterate's X, has been inscribed by the deathly maggot.[58]

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[57]For Moonlight, see p. 27n.

[58]Tindall, p. 58.

CHAPTER III: IMAGES OF TIME, THE PAST, AND INTRANSIENCE

In Part One, Chapter III, salt and sand were discussed as images associated with the genesis of life. These two images, however, may also suggest the sterile, temporal aspects of life. As stated before, the context in which these images appear determines their significance.

Thomas occasionally suggests sterility by using sand to indicate the passage of non-productive time. After one of his numerous quarrels with Caitlin, Thomas wrote "I Make This in a Warring Absence" in which he complains "Each ancient, stone-necked minute of love's season/Harbours my anchored tongue." Here Thomas is apparently lamenting the time wasted on bitter words, thoughts, and regrets that could have been better spent writing poetry. Caitlin's attitude during the feud is described as "Proud as a sucked stone and huge as sandgrains." Since a "sucked stone" will yield little reward, this phrase seems to be a sarcastic comment on the pettiness of Caitlin's false pride. Similarly, the "Huge sandgrains," like the "ancient, stone-necked minute," seems to represent the huge amount of time wasted on the silly quarrel.[59]

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[59] In another poem about Caitlin, "Into Her Lying Down Head," Thomas describes the reconciled couple as "Two sand grains together in bed,/Head to heaven-arching head."

Sand, this time red sand, is used to represent the precarious state of the pre-World War II world in "We Lying By Seasand":[60]

> We lying by seasand, watching yellow
> And the grave sea, mock who deride
> Who follow the red rivers, hollow
> Alcove of words out of cicada shade,
> For in this yellow grave of sand and sea
> A calling for colur calls with the wind
> That's grave and gay as grave and sea
> Sleeping on either hand.

The yellow sand, opposed to the sea on one side and the red sand of the desert on the other, seems at first to be emblematic of stability. The two lovers, however, soon learn otherwise:

> The heavenly music over the sand
> Sounds with the grains as they hurry
> Hiding the golden mountains and mansions
> Of the grave, gay, seaside land.
> Bound by a sovereign strip, we lie,
> Watch yellow, wish for wind to blow away
> The strata of the shore and drown red rock;
> But wishes breed not, neither
> Can we fend off rock arrival.

"Bound by a sovereign strip" of sand, the lovers mock those who follow the "red rivers" of sand and the "hollow words" of the desert wasteland. However, from the desert "Heavenly music"

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[60] According to Tindall (Reader's Guide, p. 153), Thomas was upset by T.S. Eliot's commending the fascists in Criterion. The "Red Rock," "cicada" and desert imagery of "We Lying By Seasand" (1937) seem to be allusions to Eliot's work which Thomas then identified with the rise of Hitler's Germany. The red rock of the desert, a grail symbol in Eliot's "The Wasteland," would here seem to represent the menace of Nazi Germany and not, as other critics have insisted, the Communist Party (of which Thomas himself was temporarily a member).

(premonitions of the Nazi menace, probably in the form of Eliot's poetry) drives the red sands over the seasand strip and thus omens the approach of the "red rock" itself.

When found in the sea/womb, salt usually suggests the spark of life. When found outside of the sea, however, salt functions as an emblem of sterility or of the dangers and griefs life outside of the womb holds for the maturing infant. In "Then Was My Neophyte," salt is associated with suffering and the transience of life the fetus ("neophyte") must experience once he leaves the womb for the "flat cities" of the outside world:

> Stretch the salt photographs,
> The landscape grief, love in his oils
> Mirror from man to whale
> That the green child see like a grail
> Through veil and fin and fire and coil
> Time on the canvas paths.

The photographs of the external world are salty with grief, for on them is a picture of Time. The child, craving maturation, will see time as a grail to be pursued. Soon, however, he will see time for what it really is: the thief of life.

Salt is also associated with Grief, the thief of time in "It Is The Sinner's Dust-Tongued Bell." Time and Grief conduct the services in their deathly church, and the child who narrates the poem says:

> Over the choir minute I hear the hour chant:
> Times coral saint and the salt grief drown
> a foul sepulchre.

Again salt is associated with the grief, aging, and the inevitable death that the young boy must experience.

In "The Spire Cranes" salt suggests sterility. The birds of "The Spire Cranes" plunge from a Thomas sexual/poetic spire.[61] At the base of the tower lies the sea/womb and near it, "salt gravel." The tower, Thomas writes:

> ... does not let the feathery
> Carved birds blunt their striking throats on
> the salt gravel, [but rather]
> Pierce the spilt sky ...
> And inch in froth.

By avoiding the sterile salt gravel, the tower's conception of the poems or children is completed in the sea.

Finally, salt is associated with degeneracy and death in "Because the Pleasure Bird Whistles." Written after a visit to London in 1939, this poem compares London to Sodom and Gomorrah, and Lot's wife serves as the emblem of the decadence of modern London. As a poet, Thomas evidently felt obligated to relate his own vision of evil, and the legend of Lot's wife does not deter Thomas from looking back and describing his own "meat of a fable":

> Because there stands, one story out of a bum city,
> That frozen wife whose juices drift like a fixed
> sea.
> Secretly in statuary,
> Shall I, stuck on the hot and rocking street,

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[61]For Towers and Spires, see Part I, Chapter II.

> Not spin to stare at an old year
> Toppling and burning in the muddle of towers
> and galleries
> Like the mauled pictures of boys?
> The salt person and blasted place
> I furnish with the meat of a fable.

Thomas often uses Egypt and artifacts associated with Egyptian culture as metaphors for the past, Times ravages, and spiritual decadence. Robbed of his poetic powers by a quarrel with Caitlin,[62] Thomas describes his state as:

> Ruin, the room of errors, one road dropped
> Down the stacked sea and water-pillared shade,
> Weighed in a rock shroud, is my proud pyramid;
> Where, wound in emerald linen and sharp wind,
> The hero's head lies scraped of every legend.[63]

Similarly, the embryo of "My World Is Pyramid," realizing that womb is tomb, says:

> My world is pyramid. The padded mummer
> Weeps on the desert ochre and the salt
> Incising summer.
> My Egypt's armour buckling in its sheet,
> I scrape through resin to a starry bone
> And a blood parhelion.

The young boy of "Should Lanterns Shine" knows that his suspicions of death's certainty would be confirmed should he visit an Egyptian burial vault and see the remains of a once-beautiful Egyptian woman:

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[62]Tindall, p. 147.

[63]"I Make This in a Warring Absence," C.P., pp. 87-89.

> Should lanterns shine, the holy face,
> Caught in an octagon of unaccustomed light,
> Would wither up, and any boy of love
> Look twice before he fell from grace.
> The features in their private dark
> Are formed of flesh, but let the false day come
> And from her lips the faded pigments fall,
> The mummy cloths expose an ancient breast.

Since his reason has brought him this revelation of death's inevitableness, the boy resolves to "reason by the pulse," to live by what Lawrence called "blood knowledge." He will then, he insists, defy Time, "the quiet gentleman whose beard wags in Egyptian wind."

Thomas also uses thieves as personifications of the Time, grief, and destructive sex. The "hero" of "My Hero Bares His Nerve" contemplates the creative yet destructive aspects of sex while in the act of masturbation:

> He holds the wire from his box of nerves
> Praising the mortal error
> Of birth and death, the two sad knaves of
>   thieves,
> And the hunger's emperor.

Since the "two sad thieves" evidently stand in apposition to "birth and death," the thieves probably refer to the testicles, resevoirs of death and life. "Hunger's emperor," then, would represent the phallus, the monarch of sexual hunger.[64]

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[64]Tindall, p. 43. Tindall also notes that the two thieves suggest Christ's crucifixion on Golgotha, thus making Christ the implement of death and rebirth.

The most famous of Thomas' thieves is "Grief, Thief of Time" to whom Thomas accorded an entire poem:

> Grief thief of time crawls off,
> The moon-drawn grave, with the seafaring
>   years,
> The knave of pain steals off
> The sea-halved faith that blew time to his
>   knees,
> The old forget the cries,
> Lean time on tide and times the wind stood
>   rough,
> call back the castaways
> Riding the sea light on a sunken path,
> The old forget the grief,
> Hack of the cough, the hanging albatross,
> Cast back the bone of youth
> And salt-eyed stumble bedward where she lies
> Who tossed the high tide in a time of stories
> And timelessly lies loving with the thief.

Even though the thief has stolen their "seafaring years," the old believe that their infirmities, the "Hack of cough, the hanging albatross" can be sloughed off by dreaming of their youthful lovers. However, when they attempt, in their dreams, to "Cast back the bone of youth" the old men realize that their lovers too "timelessly lies loving with the thief."

And not only has time stolen the past, Thomas continues, but all future generations are likewise doomed:

> Now Jack my fathers let the time-faced crook,
> Death flashing from his sleeve,
> With swag of bubbles in a seedy sack
> Sneak down the stallion grave,
> Bull's-eye the outlaw through a eunuch crack
> And free the twin-boxed grief,
> No silver whistles chase him down the weeks'
> Dayed peaks to day to death,
> These stolen bubbles have the bites of snakes
> And the undead eye-teeth,
> No third eye probe into a rainbow's sex
> That bridged the human halves,
> All shall remain and on the graveward gulf
> Shape with my fathers' thieves.

CHAPTER IV: OTHER IMAGES ASSOCIATED WITH DEATH OR DEATH-IN-LIFE

Two terms which occur frequently in Dylan Thomas' poems are "death's feather" and "undead." The origin of "death's feather" is uncertain although three explanations are possible. A feather was often held under the nose of a dying man to determine if he was still breathing. It is also possible that "death's feather" refers to a feather from the wing of the Angel of Death, or the term may have as its source the Cockney expression "You could have knocked me over with a feather." Whatever the source, "death's feather" is a phrase of which Thomas was very fond. The pre-embryonic narrator of "Before I Knocked," already sure of his eventual death, says "I was struck down by death's feather." Sexual activity becomes "Death's feather on the nerve" in "If I Were Tickled by the Rub of Love." Not all of Thomas' narrators take a pessimistic view of life, however, and indeed the persona of "My World Is Pyramid" asserts his existence by exchanging the black feather of death for a red stammel [65] feather of life:

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[65] Stammel is a coarse woolen fabric used primarily in the manufacture of inexpensive underwear. The "stammel feather" suggests an active, assertive way of life.

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

Unlike "death's feather," Thomas' other favorite term, "undead," has a specific source. Thomas was an avid fan of horror movies, and he borrowed "undead" from <u>Dracula</u>. In the movie, "undead" was meant to describe the condition of vampires who are simultaneously alive and dead; Thomas uses the term in much the same way. The deathly sperm cells which Grief, Thief of Time steals off with have the "bites of snakes," snakes with "undead eye teeth." The moribund embryo of "Then Was My Neophyte" is "green, unborn and undead"; the embryos in the womb/tomb described in "I, In My Intricate Images" suffer "the undead water where the turtle nibbles." Finally, in the "Author's Prologue to <u>Collected Poems</u>," Thomas voices his fears that his poetry will become "undead" and remain unread on the shelf. Yet even if unread, Thomas says his voice will always:

> ... sing
> To you strangers ...
> . . . .
> Out of the seathumbed leaves
> That will fly and fall
> Like leaves of trees and as soon
> Crumble and undie.

A final means Thomas employs to suggest death-in-life is the juxtaposing of two Biblical allusions which are associated with the opposite extremes of death and life. For instance,

Adam is usually associated with Genesis and the creative potential.[66] Abaddon, the angel of the bottomless pit,[67] suggests suffering and death. In Sonnet I of "Altarwise By Owl Light," Thomas combines the two figures to suggest the conflicting powers of the Life Force:

> Altarwise by owl light in the half-way house
> The gentleman lay graveward with his furies;
> Abaddon in the hangnail cracked from Adam.

The gentleman (Christ, mankind, Thomas himself, or maybe all three) is destined to die as "lying graveward" and the "furies (probably the three Fatal Sisters) suggest. Half-way between womb and tomb, the gentleman is a remnant, a "fingernail," of Adam, the prototype of mankind, and within him lies Abbadon, the deathly force, which is slowly destroying him.[68]

A second Adam-Abaddon combination appears in the second sonnet. "Death is all metaphors" Thomas states in the opening line, and the central metaphor he uses combines the maturation of a child with the process of dying:

> Child of the short spark in a shapeless country
> Soon sets alight a long stick from the cradle;
> The horizontal cross-bones of Abaddon,
> You by the cavern over the black stairs,
> Rung bone and blade, the verticals of Adam,
> And, manned by midnight, Jacob to the stars.

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[66] For Adam, see Part I, Chapter III.

[67] Revelations 9:1-11.

[68] Tindall, pp. 128-130.

Created by a "short spark" in the "shapeless country of the womb, the embryo soon sets alight a "long stick." This stick is both phallic (suggesting the maturation of the child) and also serves to introduce the "Jacob's ladder" of the last line. Climbing again notes aspiration, in this instance, the desire of the child to attain adulthood by ascending from the womb to the heavens. This ladder by which the child will "Jacob to the stars," however, is composed of the "verticals" of Adam and the deathly cross-bones (rungs) of Abaddon.[69]

Thomas also frequently combines images associated with Christmas and Good Friday to suggest death-in-life. Thomas' "boys of summer already in their ruin":

> In spring ... cross [their] foreheads
> with the holly,
> Heigh ho the blood and berry;
> And nail the merry squires to the trees.

Similarly, in the tenth "Altarwise By Owl Light" sonnet, Thomas says, "I image/December's thorn screwed in a brow of holly." Finally, the "vital liquid" who narrates "If I Were Tickled by the Rub of Love" ponders the human condition. Birth instigates death, he comes to realize, and like Christ, all mankind is "born thorny on the tree."

The primary charge leveled at Dylan Thomas' early poetry is that of obscurity. In a letter to Vernon Watkins, written about the time that the "Altarwise By Owl-light" sonnets were completed, Thomas acknowledged and lamented this obscurity:

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[69] Ibid., pp. 130-131.

> [I] can't, for the life or the
> death of me, get any real liberation, any
> diffusion or dilution or anything, into the
> churning bulk of words; I seem, more than
> ever, to be tightly packing away everything
> I have and know into a mad-doctor's bag, and
> then locking it up: All you can see is the
> bag, all you can know is that it's full to
> the clasp, all you have to trust is that the
> invisible and intangible things packed away
> are-if they could only be seen and touched -
> worth quite a lot.[70]

The primary cause for this obscurity seems to be the baffling image clusters which congest Thomas' early poems, and the reason for the bothersome image clusters can be traced to Thomas' obsession with compressing his impressions of the cosmic workings of the Life Force into each poem. Repeatedly he assailed his grandiose theme with a flurry of images, but ultimately his early poems end up suggesting a multiplicity of ideas while stating practically nothing.[71] Yet however difficult these early poems may be, they contain a rude beauty that, as Thomas stated, is essential:

> For you to know
> How I, a spinning man,
> Glory also this star, bird,
> Roared, sea born, man torn, blood-blest.[72]

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[70]Quoted by Vernon Watkins in Dylan Thomas: Letters to Vernon Watkins (New York, 1957), p. 25.

[71]Olson, p. 21.

[72]"Author's Prologue," C.P., p. xvi.

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