

Bacheloroppgåve

**Dylan Thomas and
Religion**

Kim-Daniel Vattøy

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List of Abbreviations

D&E *Deaths and Entrances* (1946)

TFP *Twenty-Five Poems* (1936)

1. Introduction

These poems, with all
their crudities, doubts, and confusions, are written for the love of Man
and in praise of God, and I'd be a damn' fool if they weren't.

Dylan Thomas, November 1952

The twentieth century saw a growing use of technological warfare which led some to fear that civilisation itself was at risk. The two world wars also raised the question of whether the existence of a Christian God had any relevance. This affected the way writers employed religious ideas, imagery, and language. Dylan Marlais Thomas (1914-1953) was an Anglo-Welsh poet who sought to trace his roots in a bewildered literary and spiritual landscape. In this paper, I shall explore the role religious language and belief played in this quest.

In order to illustrate how Thomas's handling of religion developed across time, I shall discuss two collections which he published either side of World War Two: *Twenty-Five Poems (TFP)* (1936) and *Deaths and Entrances (D&E)* (1946). Since religious poetry expresses itself through the form of a poem as well as its theme (as I shall explain shortly), I will apply the methodology of close-reading to selected poems from these collections, namely: "I, in my Intricate Image" and "Altarwise by Owl-Light" from *TFP*; and "The Conversation of Prayers" and "Fern Hill" from *D&E*. These poems introduce and conclude their respective collections, and are thus of vital importance, since they put forward and sum up formal and thematic features that run throughout the collection to which they belong. In keeping with their position in each collection, they also explore in depth the crucial theme of beginnings (the search for roots) and ends and they award this theme a clear religious dimension through several references to Genesis and the Gospels.

I have also chosen to focus on these two collections because they are representative of the stylistic change that happens in Thomas's poetry during the course of ten years. During this period, World War Two changed the face of Europe. Several aspects of Thomas's personal life also changed: he entered married life (with all the turbulence that followed); and he became a father. I will argue that there is a shift in the poetry Thomas wrote either side of the Second World War from communicating religion through dense symbolism to a clearer and

more transparent usage. Whereas *TFP* is preoccupied with an evocation of creation myths and poetry's attempted analogy with nature, *D&E* communicates religion using, for instance, a bedside prayer and childhood memories that recall the innocence of the creation myth of the Garden of Eden. However, motifs such as the sea and Genesis run through both collections, and point to continuities in his verse.

In this discussion, our definition of religion is important. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines religion as a: "belief in or acknowledgement of some superhuman power or powers (esp. a god or gods) which is typically manifested in obedience, reverence, and worship" ("Religion", 2009). From this perspective of religion as a system of belief, Thomas may not look to some like a religious poet. Shapiro (1966) argues that: "in [Thomas's] poems we find neither faith nor humanism" (p. 176). Wain (1966) likewise does not find Thomas's theme of religion convincing, writing that: "[...] religion, seems to me Thomas's worst pitch; he never succeeds in making me feel that he is doing more than thumbing a lift from it" (p. 11). Moynihan (1968) claims that "[Thomas] cared nothing for Christ in a theological sense, he said, but cared very much for Christ as a symbol" (p. 38). They all seem to imply that religion in Thomas is primarily ornamental, and that it diverges with what they would characterise as "religious poetry". On the other hand, one might take into account his upbringing in puritan Wales. Thomas was raised in the after-math of the Welsh Revival of 1904-1905, the largest Christian revival in Wales in the 20th century. His mother took him to the Paraclete Congregational Church in Newton, Mumbles, as a child (Ackerman, 1991). This is important since this was how religion was communicated to Thomas, affecting to some extent how he would later come express the theme of religion himself. Welsh Nonconformist religion stressed personal puritanism with an emphasis on redemption through the flesh, in keeping with the aspect of "obedience [and] reverence" in *OED*'s definition.

Thomas had a rebellious attitude to religion. Ackerman argues that "his views on adolescent sexuality were certainly contrary to the prevailing social ethos of the thirties, and would have been particularly shocking to the Nonconformist outlook that still dominated Welsh life" (p. 15). A good example of this is the line "my nest of mercies in the rude, red tree" from "Altarwise by Owl-Light". His rebellious and controversial attitude to religion does not, however, mean that either Thomas himself or his poetry is not religious. As I shall illustrate, his frequent focus on the story of Adam and Eve and the crucifixion, as well as other passages from the Bible, can be interpreted as genuine and meaningful expressions of religion.

To this point, I have addressed religion in Thomas as *theme*. Nonetheless, religion in Thomas can equally be conveyed through *form*. RS Thomas, a contemporary of Thomas, included two of Thomas's poems in *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*: "There Was a Saviour" and "Fern Hill". RS Thomas offers an additional definition of religious verse, where he attempts to make this connection with "religion as embracing an experience of ultimate reality, and poetry as the imaginative presentation of such" (1986: 64). In RS Thomas's definition, poetry is not defined as "religious" solely if it is *about* religion or if the religious language is exclusively ornamental: a way of expressing something else entirely. Instead, it needs to convey an *experience*.

As I have already indicated, the form of Thomas's poetry changes between the two collections considered here, and this applies also to its use of religious language and imagery. Religion is communicated in *TFP* through complex religious symbolism, whereas in *D&E* it is much clearer. Several of the poems in both collections, moreover, have a metapoetic quality and use the language and imagery of religion to explore their own existence and status in the world, as well as their interest in how they came into existence and in where they are heading. Moynihan (1968), for instance, contends that "Thomas saw the poet not only as a kind of Christ, as a celebrator, and bard [...], but also as fated to destroy himself in his role as a poet [...]" (p. 59). "The Conversation of Prayers", on the other hand, is ultimately a prayer and hope for the future, as Thomas seeks consolation in a time of war. In the collection from which this poem is taken, *D&E*, Ackerman (1991) finds an all-encompassing Christian God, where nature is identical with divinity, and traces it back to Thomas's "Welsh background": "[A] resounding resurgent pantheism, with its unfadingly lyrical intimations of mortality and immortality, those waves of affirmation that sang in their chains like the sea" (p. 4). This is particularly found in poems such as "Fern Hill".

Ackerman's use of the phrase "waves of affirmation" to characterise Thomas's pantheistic verse points to the correlation between religion and nature in his poetry, not least in the form of the sea. The sea is a common motif in his poetry, expressing as it does his concern with origins. Originating as it does from Dylan Eil Ton ("Sea son of Wave"), Thomas's own name finds its roots in this key metaphor. Indeed, the language of the sea functions as a self-referential gesture throughout his poetry, and points to his theme of origins and the divided self. The sea is chaotic, but at the same time creative; just as "I, in my Intricate Image," the first poem of *TFP*, culminates "in the intricate sea-whirl" (107), so the last poem of *D&E* returns to the same image: "I sang in my chains like the sea" (54). Shapiro (1966) claims that

“Thomas was not interested in philosophical answers. Religion, such as he knew it, was direct and natural; the symbolism of religion, as he uses it, is poetry, direct knowledge” (p. 174). In this interpretation of religion in Thomas, one could argue that religion, nature, and poetry are more or less the same, derived from the same source. RS Thomas argues that “it is not necessarily the poems couched in conventionally religious language that convey the truest experience.” (1986: 65).

The first collection I shall discuss, *TFP*, is, by contrast, “couched” in *unconventionally* religious language. Religion, nature, and poetry are weaved together. This pattern, established by Thomas in the first poem, is consistent throughout the rest of *TFP*.

2. Twenty-Five Poems (1936)

Most of the poems in *TFP* are contemporary with those of *18 Poems* (1934), as although the two I shall be discussing here, “I, in my Intricate Image” and “Altarwise by Owl-Light” were written later in 1935 and 1936 (Tindall, 1962). These poems look back on and develop the earlier style, but Davies (1998) observes thematic changes: “Significantly, whereas the first poem of *18 Poems* was about repression, its counterpart in *Twenty-five Poems* is about the related theme of the divided self” (p. 150). *TFP* continues the rebellious and alienated attitude of *18 Poems*, where critics, in line with Shapiro and Wain, argue there is a questioning of the resurrection of Christ. This questioning is extended in *TFP* to include the question of the relevance of Christianity after the atrocities of WWI. However, in this collection Thomas emerges more clearly as a religious poet. Ackerman (1991) argues that this is shown “in his metaphysical concern with the fundamental processes in man and nature” (p. 71), thus lending weight to my earlier observation that for Thomas religion, nature and poetry derive from the same source.

The major themes in *TFP* are the divided self, the intertwinings of life and death, and cultural origins. The collection as a whole may be seen as a sea voyage which throughout the progression of the poems is transformed to a Christian voyage. We shall take this voyage now by starting with the first poem in the collection and coming to harbour with the last.

“I, in my Intricate Image” (1935)

As the first poem of *TFP*, “I, in my Intricate Image” sets up the major ideas that run through the collection as a whole: internal echoes of the sea, the dividing up of things and ideas, creation myths, and beginnings at the same time as death. The notion of a metapoem is a crucial feature in “I, in my Intricate Image”, since a metapoem featuring religious imagery functions, in itself, as an analogue of religious experience. If poetry, religion, and nature are more or less the same thing, then everything is inter-connected, supporting the idea of the poet as one who weaves things together.

The first part of the poem deals with the creation of nature, man, and the poem itself. In the second part, the “images” created in part one are sent out on a voyage which ascends “heaven’s hill” (108) in part three. The poem is thus divided into three parts, with each stanza consisting of six lines. This may illustrate the Devil’s number, 666, and foreshadow the appearance of an “Incarnate Devil” in line 22: “the pictured devil”. These three parts may also connote the three days between the death and resurrection of Christ, foreshadowing the theme of creation and destruction. The prominence of the sea as a site of both chaos and creation, meanwhile, takes the form of numerous direct references as well as the persistent use of the liquid sound of the letter “l” which appears 209 times, particularly in final positions.

The title, “I, in my Intricate Image” places a significant emphasis on the individual “I”, as well as introducing the image of the self as “intricate”, which is in one sense positive, denoting that different pieces fit together. The opposite, “to extricate” is arguably what we readers do as we try to untangle a meaning. Thomas, by contrast, does the opposite, and seeks to weave threads, things, and ideas together. This is seen in the creation of nature and man: “She [Nature personified] threads off the sap and needles, blood and bubble” (10). Thomas creates a mechanical and natural person coming together: “My man of leaves and the bronze root, mortal, immortal” (16). Nature is delicately fused in “I, in my Intricate Image”, and described as a powerful spiritual force. Man is as much *from* nature, as *in* nature, supporting Ackerman’s pantheistic assertions. The phrase “Image of images” (14) may set the “I” in relation to God, by referring to Genesis 1:27, where God created man in His image. Nonetheless, as a metapoetic poem, the poet too is a creator of an image of images. Thomas introduces a duality: they “stride on two levels” (1) as the “half ghost in armour hold hard in death’s corridor,” (5). The ghost metaphor is a continuation from *18 Poems*, “Before I knocked”: “I, born of flesh and ghost, was neither / A ghost nor man, but mortal ghost” (37-

38). By using the ghost metaphor Thomas also points to his theme of the simultaneity of death and life. “Beginning with doom in the bulb, the spring unravels” (7) confirms that death is present from the very start. This theme is also a continuation of the idea of death in life as represented in “The Force that Through the Green Fuse” from *18 Poems*; the same force that gives life also destroys it. Still, in “I, in my Intricate Image”, it is the “image of images” that is “Forcing forth through the harebell” (15). The creation and destruction of nature, man, and the poem are inter-connected.

One of the most common allusions of *TFP* is to Genesis. In stanza three of “I, in my Intricate Image” the speaker refers to the banishment of the Garden of Eden after the Fall: “My man of leaves [...]” (16). At other times, as in stanza four, the association of religious imagery with creativity takes a sexual form and involves phallic representations, e.g.: “the fortune of manhood: the natural peril, / A steeplejack tower, bonerailed, masterless,” (19-20). Here, the puns “steeplejack tower” and “bonerailed” connote an exaggerated phallus, representing fertility. Olson (1966) argues, however, that “Thomas associates ladders and climbing, not with sexual intercourse, but with man’s spiritual ascent” (p. 49).

Creation and destruction appear simultaneously. Man is “rais[ed] like a mountain” (11), but at the same time brought down: “Mount on man’s footfall,” (27) and the pun of “Hearing the weather fall” (29). Adam is the wether, metaphorically a castrated buck due to the loss of all Edenic possibilities, but also the scapegoat of humanity. This connection becomes evident when looking at “Altarwise by Owl-Light” (Sonnet III: 31); “That Adam’s wether in the flock of horns”. Adam is subsequently ridiculed in Sonnet VI: “Adam, time’s joker” (81). Yet, this burden of sin applies to all of mankind, and is thus an object for unification.

The first part of “I in my Intricate Image” ends with the images that have been created being sent off on a sea voyage. The paradox of “departing adventure” (35) and “sea-blown arrival” (36) illustrates the metaphysical conceit of Thomas, and points to the theme of beginnings and ends combined; the moment of birth is also the first step toward an inevitable death. “Clock-wise” implies the normal progression of time, but at the same time there is the aspect of eternity: and aspect that is recurred to in the phrase “Time in the hourless houses” (99) in part three.

Having set off on their voyage, the images at the start of part 2 “climb the country pinnacle” (37) which may be the “steeplejack tower” (20) of part I, and consequently connected to religion. This is reinforced by the reference to Christ as a “white host” encountered by the

twelve apostles as “twelve winds” (38). As the images reach the top of the height, they jump and dive into the water. This moment of creation is at the same time a moment of death as the poem makes a turn into a “Death instrumental,” (49). Everything goes around in a spiral as a sea-whirl. “Your corkscrew grave centred in navel and nipple” (51) suggests that in the same way as the corkscrew has the shape of a spiral staircase, resembling “Jacob’s angle [ladder]” (81) in part III with its prospects of heaven, yet it is also a lethal device. Correspondingly, the navel is from where the umbilical cord, which may have a spiralling shape, provides infants life at birth, but at the same time it is the conduit that will be cut, in keeping with the poem’s motif of cutting things. Subsequently, a soldier is operated at a medical table, and dies in the process. This sacrifice points to the altar as a sacrificial table in “Altarwise by Owl-Light”.

The imagery at this point is inspired by the Great War: an “antiseptic funeral” by “the tray of knives” (54). The war imagery, consisting of “monstrous officers”; “decaying army” (56); “sexton sentinel”, is connected to the New Testament and resurrection of Jesus, wearing a crown of thorns: “garrisoned under thistles” (57). We then encounter lines that are particularly rich in religious allusion:

A cock-on-a-dunghill
Crowing to Lazarus the morning is vanity
Dust be your saviour under the conjured soil.
(58-60)

The cock reference is to Peter, who denied Jesus thrice before the cock crowed in the morning. In John 11, Jesus awoke late Lazarus from the dead. The power of human destruction makes Thomas question whether there is a life after death, although the soil is not any soil, but “conjured” due to the powers of a saviour and, at the same time, the poet as a magician *conjuring* images. Genesis 3:19, “for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return”, echoes in these lines too, suggesting once again the theme of birth and death.

Davies (1998) claims that “[t]he imagery of the Great War reinforces the idea of death as finality, as the “sexton sentinel” echoing the period’s trenches-induced loss of faith in mocking even Lazarus’s hopes of resurrection” (p. 152). Nevertheless, Thomas manages to find a middle ground between blind faith and absolute rejection, although he questions assiduously how a benevolent and omniscient Creator can withstand the horrors of human malevolence, and prospects of annihilation. However, if this is a poem about creation and the creation of a poem, the subjunctive, “Dust be your saviour” (60), can be taken as wish. There

is certainly resurrection and recreation in this interpretation, possibly even redemption, but that does not separate man from death and decay; they are a part of one another.

The third part of the poem continues the sea voyage, and here too the images of splitting things up are prominent. “Sprout from the stony lockers like a tree on Aran” (78) employs “sprout” as a jussive subjunctive. “sprout” then becomes a wish, thus indicating the poem’s own involvement in the processes of creation it describes. A series of imperatives follow, and at a metapoetic level it seems as if the poet is praying things into existence. “a tree on Aran” is a reference to the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland. This may be a gesture to Yeats, considering the towers Thomas constructs are towers of creativity on a metapoetic level. At the same time, seeing that Thomas frequently refers to Genesis, the myth of Noah’s Ark, where the dove brought an olive leaf whilst Noah was still at sea, is evoked through the suggestion of “Ark” in “Aran”.

Sea imagery continues to intensify, which points to the importance of the conjunction between natural and literary roots. “And the five-fathomed Hamlet on his father’s coral” (83) swirls together in a scene of apparent chaos *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*, where Ferdinand thinks his father, Prospero, has drowned in water. Thomas “suffer[s] [this] slash of vision” (85) recalling Ariel’s lines: “Nothing of him that doth fade / But doth *suffer* a sea-change / Into something rich and strange”. This underpins the sea metaphor in “I, in my Intricate Image”. Thomas’s role in this part is very similar to that of Prospero in his use of imperatives: he is a creator of images, and declares things into existence.

The poem concludes:

This was the god of beginning in the intricate seawhirl
And my images roared and rose on heaven’s hill.

(107-108)

These final lines contain the main points of the discussion of “I, in my Intricate Image”. Poetry, nature, and God are intertwined as Thomas circles back to the beginning through “the intricate seawhirl”. The symbolism of rising and falling is repeated, and religion is deeply embedded in nature. These features recur all the way up to “Altarwise by Owl-Light”: religion and nature are the same thing in “This Bread I Break”; “Incarnate Devil” picks up “heaven’s hill” and circles back to the Garden of Eden as a “shaping time”, also connoting the making of poetry (i.e., the shape of a poem); and the dead sink like the sea, but rise again in “And Death

Shall have no Dominion". "Altarwise by Owl-Light" employs all these features and is more overtly Christian.

"Altarwise by Owl-Light" (1935, 1936)

"Altarwise by Owl-Light" concludes *TFP*. It picks up on a lot of ideas from "I, in my Intricate Image". It is a sequence of ten sonnets, and finds most of its imagery from the Bible, as it transforms the sea voyage from "I, in my Intricate Image" into a "Christian voyage" (127). The Christianity is already latent in "I, in my Intricate Image", but drawn out in "Altarwise by Owl-light". This poem takes us through the Gospels: from Christ's nativity to the resurrection. The sonnet sequence operates as a cycle, reinforcing the imagery of things and ideas going around in circles as in "I, in my Intricate Image", and it often appears as a spiral where there is vertical movement, seeing as things are raised and demolished, as well as pointing to eternity. The symbol of Jacob's ladder from "I, in my Intricate Image" reappears: "And manned by midnight, Jacob to the stars" (24). Considering the aspect that "Altarwise by Owl-Light" is more overtly Christian than "I, in my Intricate Image", there seems to be a development from religion in general to a more specific Christian one in the collection. Kleinman (1963) calls "Alterwise by Owl-Light" *The Religious Sonnets of Dylan Thomas*, and is confident that through Thomas's confusion there is hope: "I believe the sonnets are a deeply moving statement of religious perplexity concluding in spiritual certainty" (p. 11). In the same fashion, the sea-journey of *TFP* moves from perplexity to religious assurance, as Thomas finds comfort and mercy "in the rude red tree" (140).

Throughout *TFP*, Thomas wrestles with the theme of sin and forgiveness. "Incarnate Devil" is very much about the introduction of sin into the world, where a "serpent fiddled in the shaping-time" (18). However, there is a foreshadowing that God will come down to the earth, giving forgiveness "from the heavens' hill" (6), echoing the last lines of "I, in my Intricate Image" as well as "Incarnate Devil". The ten sonnets of "Altarwise by Owl-Light" may, as a consequence, connote that the Ten Commandments that once were impossible for man to abide by, due to sin, are fulfilled due to the resurrection of Christ. This would seem to be indicated in the sequence's closing line: "My nest of mercies in the rude red tree" (140). The ten sonnets are "topsy-turvied," to borrow Thomas's own words from "I, in my Intricate Image": the sestet appears before the octave. Thomas achieves, through half-rhymes, to tie up

form and meaning: they point to the incompleteness of the sea voyage, and support the notion of cutting up and dividing things, introduced in “I, in my Intricate Image”.

The very title of the sonnet sequence indicates a sacrificial element: the poem’s theme is turned “altarwise”. Seeing as an altar is a sacrificial table, the theme also moves from the Old Testament’s practices of sacrifice to the New Testament’s crucifixion, indicating Christ’s sacrifice at Calvary. “owl-light” denotes dusk, and implies that something is unclear or obscure. More importantly, the title gives us a direction and such directions continue with words like “graveward” (2) and, most importantly, “Christward” (12), as they all point to the end of the journey.

The first sonnet commences in “the half-way house” (1), something that may be seen as Virgin Mary’s womb: Jesus the infant was not yet born into the earthly and sinful world. “The Furies” are three goddesses in Greek mythology, who punish people for their crimes (Hornby, 2013); Jesus is sent to atone for the punishment that awaits humanity, according to Christian tradition. The antagonism between vengeance (furies) and forgiveness (Jesus) is thus established. The poet, as a craftsman, balances these forces.

The theme of the creation of a poem is revisited in “Altarwise by Owl-Light”. Thomas’s star sign was *libra* which is referred to in “I, in my Intricate Image”: “The scales of this twin world tread on the double” (4). The scales balance ideas and objects, supporting the splitting of images in “I, in my Intricate Image”. In “Altarwise by Owl-Light”, the poet is identified between two opposites, and “share[s] [his] bed with Capricorn and Cancer”. This role of the poet is confirmed in the last sonnet, where the “I” from “I, in my Intricate Image” returns: “Time’s shipwrecked gospel on the globe I balance” (129). In this line it becomes salient that the poet is captain of the ship on this religious sea voyage. The tree that was raised in “I, in my Intricate Image”, is, similarly, explained in metapoetic terms, as the poet declares the word into existence and explains the abstract in natural processes: “Now stamp the Lord’s Prayer on a grain of rice, / A Bible-leaved of all the written woods” (85-86). Thomas combines the transcendent with the immanent, as the written word, alluding to God’s word, is made of living wood. His role as a Prospero is similar to that of “I, in my Intricate Image”. The theme of beginnings and ends is, too, re-sounded as there is “Genesis in the root” (88) and “Doom on deniers” (90).

Ackerman (1991) finds “a metaphysical delight in the daring conjunction of the sexual and religious”, asserting that “one is reminded of Yeats’s comment that ‘only the true believer

dare blaspheme', albeit Dylan Thomas was Bible-haunted rather than Bible-blest" (p. 92). One might argue that Thomas contested the established conformities of Nonconformist religion, where sexual force, especially outside of marriage, was perceived as sinful and destructive. Instead, Thomas saw sexuality as a powerful and procreative force not to be excluded from religion, but rather punned and seen in relation to natural life. "Old cock from nowhere and the heaven's egg" (8) refers to God and the Incarnation of Christ. It offers a natural and pastoral parallel, raising the question of how this divine pregnancy could occur. In sonnet V, the archangel Gabriel is described as a cowboy in a display of male virility: "And from the windy West came two-gunned Gabriel" (57). Thomas thus uses the stories from the Gospel in a new context, and puns sexual energy even on the cross: "My nest of mercies in the rude, red tree." (140).

Thomas finds consolation in this sacrificial nature of the crucifixion. He acknowledges Christ as history's greatest surgeon: "I by the tree of thieves, all glory's sawbones / Unsex the skeleton this mountain minute," (Sonnet VIII, 109-110). This relates back to the poet as a dissector, as discovered in "I, in my Intricate Image". Ackerman argues that "Thomas interestingly insists that death unsexes, so again associating death with sin" (1991:93). This observation is significant, seeing that religion and eroticism have been among Thomas's chief processes throughout *TFP*. The idea that "Altarwise by Owl-Light" offers a conclusion to this is in line with the poem's role as a conclusion to *TFP*.

There are Modernist elements that more or less influence Thomas's presentation of religious themes in this sonnet sequence and throughout *TFP*. There is communicated significantly more disruption and disillusion. Kleinman is fascinated by the un-Romantic rendering of the Nativity in Sonnet I: "There is no angelic doxology sung, there are no astonished exclamations of the shepherds. The only sounds we hear are tomorrow's scream, the wind, and the scraping at the cradle. The rest is dark silence" (1963:22). Thomas is not preoccupied with the glorifications of the Nativity. He is, by contrast, interested in creating a sacrificial and dead serious atmosphere.

Thomas creates a powerful symbol of "the horizontal cross-bones of Abaddon" (21) (death) and "the vertical of Adam" (23) (sin) as a mortal stamp on humanity. These are both transformed into a Cross which after the crucifixion restored the link between Man and God. This is an exemplary instance of poetic vision, and through the decaying grimness Thomas creates hope for resurrection. The idea of the poem as a cross is revisited, and expanded as it

stretches “[f]rom pole to pole leapt round the snail-waked world” (108). There are references to “I see the boys of summer,” the first poem of *18 Poems*, where the final line writes: “O see the poles are kissing as they cross” (54). *TFP*’s “Today, this insect” confirms this idea of the cross as a metaphor for a poem: “My cross of tales behind the fabulous curtain” (26). We see here, and elsewhere, that the cross is an emblem of Thomas’s own poetry. Conspicuously, “cross of tales” looks like a clever way of presenting his ideas about something else, leading many critics to label religion’s role in Thomas as ornamental. However, the cross in Thomas is connected through several poems, foreshadows Christ’s sacrifice in “Altarwise by Owl-Light”, and offers a deeper sense of religious experience.

“Altarwise by Owl-Light” expresses religion through both form and theme, and is more overtly Christian than “I, in my Intricate Image”. There is a heartbeat and progression through the rhythm and regularity of the sonnet structure. Familiar images such as “Jacob’s Ladder” and “Adam and Eve” recur. They look back to the beginning, but also point forward to the end. The cross as a symbol does the very same: it points not only to the death and resurrection of Christ, but also the poet. Sex and religion, a theme that Thomas has been wrestling with throughout *TFP*, are divided through death, and he finds forgiveness “in the rude, red tree”. “Altarwise by Owl-Light” concludes the many foreshadowings seen in *TFP* as a whole: “This Bread I Break” pointed to Christ’s body that was broken; “I, in my Intricate Image” and “Incarnate Devil” both pointed to “heaven’s hill”, which is Golgotha in “Altarwise by Owl-Light”. *TFP* has a metapoetic level, where religious imagery functions, in itself, as an analogue of religious experience. We have thus seen continuities as well as developments from the very first poem in *TFP*. In the course of ten years, the Second World War shattered Europe, and Thomas produced *Deaths and Entrances*.

3. Deaths and Entrances (1946)

While there are certain continuities between *TFP* and *D&E* – such as the sea metaphor, the motif of circles and the theme of beginnings and ends – there is a significant change of religious imagery in Dylan Thomas’s *D&E*. It becomes much clearer and religion is presented, for instance, as a “conversation” instead of through complex religious imagery and other allusions (from Old Testament and Greek mythology). For this reason, Davies (1998) claims “*Deaths and Entrances* [to be] Dylan Thomas’s finest volume. It is the culmination of the clarifying tendency detected in the volumes of the 1930s” (p. 189). Davies divides the

poems into two groups: one group from 1939 to 1941 and another from 1944 and 1945. Similarly, the poems are roughly divided in two: war poems and nostalgia poems. The theme of the futility of war is new in *D&E*, and is displayed in such poems as “The Conversation of Prayers”, “A Refusal to Mourn”, “Into her Lying down Head”, “Deaths and Entrances”, and “Ceremony after a Fire-Raid”. These poems pick up war through the motif of fire, referring to bombing. They open up the theme of lost childhood, and make a contrast to the poems where Thomas recollects childhood memories, such as “Poem in October” and “A Winter’s Tale”.

Ackerman (1991) contends that an “[e]xamination of *Deaths and Entrances* highlights Dylan Thomas as perhaps the first major civilian war-poet, his important childhood poems, and traces the lyrics pantheism of his later verse” (p. xv, preface). The lyrics’ pantheism, the idea that religion is in everything, confirms the notion of religion and poetry being more or less the same thing, deriving from the same source. The title comes from Donne’s last sermon, *Death’s Duel*: “In all our periods and transitions in life, are so many passages from death to death; our very birth and *entrance* into this life is *exitus à morte*, an issue from death” (1961: 231). As this title indicates, the theme of birth as the first step towards death is taken up once again. Thomas stresses, furthermore, that these processes often take place simultaneously: a birth in death, and vice versa. *D&E* contends that these processes are natural.

After the outbreak of World War Two, Thomas became much more interested in the loss of innocence and the destruction of civilisation caused by war. “The Conversation of Prayers” sets up the grim prospects of children in a war-torn world. In “A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London,” he confronts his former style in *Twenty-Five Poems*: “I shall not [...] / blaspheme down the stations of the breath” (14 and 16). Thomas refuses to mourn the death of a child killed by the London bombing due to his convictions that death is a natural part of life, and that through death we are reunited with nature. Nature is given religious semblance: “And I must enter again the round / Zion of the water bead / And the synagogue of the ear of corn” (7-9). However, we still find striking similarities to *TFP*, including his belief that processes appear and reappear in circles.

Other features of the religious outlook of *TFP* that are picked up on and developed in *D&E* include the figure of Christ himself. From appearing first with an uncapitalised “c” in “Before I Knocked” from *18 Poems*: “dying christ” (42), to being connected to direction in “Altarwise by Owl-Light”: “Christward shelter” (12), Christ’s name stands alone and capitalised in *D&E*. As a consequence, there are prospects for eternity through the Christ symbol. The theme of

birth and death is united in this symbol. This is shown in “Unluckily for a Death”: “With immortality at my side like Christ the sky” (49) and “Hurling into beginning like Christ the child” (52) alludes to “Altarwise by Owl-Light”. At the same time, Thomas steers clear from any ironical implication, as he moves to religious statement.

Another key motif that *D&E* develops from *TFP* is the metaphor of the sea. Still providing a way of going back to his origins, the sea has now been expanded to be a place of mourning, as “A Refusal to Mourn” states: “Deep with the first dead lies London’s daughter” (19). At the same time “the first dead” points back to historical origins. As a self-referential gesture, it emphasises that the poet is in a place of mourning and evokes the forces of nature to join his laments. Thomas takes comfort in the fact that death ends the sufferings of life: “After the first death, there is no other” (24).

“The Conversation of Prayers” (1945)

“The Conversation of Prayers” is the first poem of *D&E*. It consists of four stanzas of five lines each. Thomas joins two parallel stories that occur at the same time, but not the same place: a man and a child are both about to say their evening prayer. Religion is, consequently, communicated in the private sphere. The man on the stairs envisions that his love “in the high room” (3) is dead. The child, on the other hand, is completely indifferent in his prayer to whom “in his sleep he will move” (4). The conversation is a metaphor of a prayer as something reciprocal. It continues by saying that a prayer has an asking and an “answering” (7) aspect. The prayers, articulated in “sound” (6) “arise” as if they are clouds. These prayers turn on the “answering skies”, and the turning point occurs in stanza three, where the man finds his love “alive and warm” (15). The prayer as a conversation for the child, by contrast, turns into a two-way-monologue, as “he is marked by the dark eyed wave” (19), and is dragged “up the stairs to one who lies dead” (20). Thomas succeeds, through these parallels, to portray both a God who answers prayers and a God who takes a step back and witnesses the progression of humanity into oblivion.

In the same fashion, *D&E* sets up ideas, from the very start, of both a world at war where children die, and a world at peace, where children may sleep in the “safe land” (10). “The Conversation of Prayers” sets up the important context of World War Two. Thomas depicts

the London Blitz from 1940-41 and communicates a country where no one can sleep safely due to heavy bombing: “Man was the burning England she was sleep-walking” (20). The casualties of war make Thomas pick up the theme of sacrifice from “Altarwise by Owl-Light”, now to connote the unnecessary sacrifices of war as well as Christ’s sacrifice: “on the altar of London” in “Ceremony after a Fire-Raid” (38). To Thomas, these deaths are too tragic “and miracles cannot atone” (16). However, the persona pleads God for forgiveness on behalf of humanity, and points to Christ’s death and resurrection, as the tears from “The Conversation of Prayers” have turned into a flood in “Ceremony after a Fire-Raid”:

Forgive
 Us Forgive
 Give
 Us your death that myselfes the believers
 May hold it in a great flood

(17-21)

“Vision and prayer”, likewise, ends in a prayer, and Thomas surrenders “in the name of the damned” (190). Again, the poet is found in Christ through death: “I / Am found / O let him / Scald me and drown / Me in his world’s wound” (196-200). In “The Conversation of Prayers,” there is a metrical regularity with alternating stressed and unstressed syllables. This rhythm alludes to the heartbeat of the persona and the sound of stepping on the stairs. The motif of things going in “turns” (6, 14), resembling the circle motif from *TFP*, is reinforced by the theme of prayer as a conversation, which denotes a reciprocal turn-taking of speech. This is shown through form, where there is a criss-cross of rhyming as well as end rhyming. The first stanza has an end rhyme pattern of “A-Title-B-B-A”, where “ABBA” may point to “father” in Hebrew. Almost the entire Old Testament, which has been alluded to several times since *18 Poems*, was written first in Hebrew. This may point to Thomas’s theme of origins, as well as pointing to the relationship between a father and son. The criss-cross rhyming of the second stanza where “arise” (6) rhymes with “skies” (7) and “ground” (7) with “sound” (9), picks up the motif of cycles, both on the level of conversation and ideas. “The Conversation of Prayers” introduces the metaphor of sleep (4, 10, 12, 19) as a death. This idea is revisited in “Fern Hill” and connected to the wave: “riding to sleep” (49). This sleep will end in the “unmourning water” (22) of “A Refusal to Mourn,” as the “child [...] shall drown in a grief as deep as his true grave” (17-18). The focus on the child will be strongly connected to death, in

“Ceremony after a Fire-Raid,” as Thomas eventually grieves “over the dead infants” (50) in World War Two, and ties it up again to the sea in a Modernistic form:

The masses of the sea
The masses of the sea under
The masses of the infant-bearing sea
[...]
Glory glory glory
The sundering ultimate kingdom of genesis' thunder

(73-75; 77-78)

Thomas continues splitting images and ideas as God's kingdom (eternity) is forked by Genesis (beginning). The repetition of the above-mentioned lines reinforces the idea of mourning, and alludes to religious ceremonies where sentences or phrases are repeated, evoking spirituality. The contrast in height between the deep sea and the open sky is set up by “The Conversation of Prayers”: “the true grave” (18) in the deep ocean is connected to the “answering skies” (7) by nothing less than Jacob's ladder from “I, in my Intricate Image” and “Altarwise by Owl-Light”.

“The Conversation of Prayers” continues to “create a double”, as in “I, in my Intricate Image,” revealing it as a meta-poem; Thomas creates two parallel prayers. The poem is much more selective with its imagery; Thomas does not draw an explicit parallel to Jacob's ladder, but focuses on the parallel of a child and a man who are about to go to bed. The euphemism of “climbing the golden staircase” is tempting since there is a lurking premonition of death. The child is oblivious to the scope of death, and the poet laments and suggests grimly this universal truth: “Shall drown in a grief as deep as his true grave” (18). The man, “who climbs to his dying love in her high room” (3), foresees the end of his love, but finds her “alive and warm” (5). However, Thomas has grim visions of the child's future. Seeing as it is World War II, the child “Shall drown in a grief as deep as his made grave [...] / Dragging him up the stairs to one who lies dead” (18 and 20). This is the “grave truth” (15) and reality envisioned in “A Refusal to Mourn” where the child is dead. “the fire of his care” (16) conceived in “The Conversation of Prayers” as something passionate and loving, has turned into “the majesty and burning of the child's death” (13). So has “the dark eyed wave” (19) turned into a “sea tumbling in harness” (6) in “A Refusal to Mourn”. The paradox of harnessing the sea is a

recurrent image from “I, in my Intricate Image”. Interestingly, this metaphor reappears when the ‘I’ from ‘I, in my Intricate Image’ returns in “A Refusal to Mourn”. This wave, created in “The Conversation of Prayers”, is a “raping wave” (‘Into her lying down head’: 7), as it steals the childhood innocence.

Thomas creates a trisection of levels: the sea and the “dark eyed wave” (19), the “green ground” (7), and the “high room” (3) or “answering skies” (7). This trisection is transformed into creatures in “A Refusal to Mourn”: “bird, beast and flower” (2). The bird represents the sky, whereas the flower represents the green ground, alluding to Genesis and beginning. The “dark eyed wave” appears as a dark eyed beast, connecting it to death.

“The Conversation of Prayers” is essentially a prayer. Metrical regularity and fixed rhyme patterns contribute a heartbeat to the poem. The sound of walking up a staircase is evoked, as Thomas foresees grim prospects for the child. The poem introduces war and childhood innocence as new themes of *D&E*. Sleep is connected to death, and the wave and sea do not only look back to the beginning, but function as metaphors of mourning. The contrast between the man’s alertness of the approaching death compared to that of the child’s ignorance points to the very end of the collection, “Fern Hill,” where the Thomas celebrates this ignorance as bliss. Likewise, *D&E* may be seen as a longing to take the journey back to such childhood joys.

“Fern Hill” (1945)

“Fern Hill” is the final poem of *D&E*. It was “composed during August 1945 and in September, in Carmarthenshire, near the farm where it happened” (Davies, 1998: 196). The dates are significant, seeing as this was the final year of World War Two. The war in Europe ended 8 May 1945, and Japan surrendered 15 August the same year. This enables the poem to look back beyond the war and recollect childhood joys. Religion is communicated to Thomas through nature in “Fern Hill”. The final poem of *D&E* concludes with the beginning of the poet’s life.

The poem consists of six stanzas of nine lines each. The shape of the poem resembles waves, alluding to Thomas’s motif of the sea. Compared to the more tight and conventional “The Conversation of Prayers,” “Fern Hill” allows the lines to flow as the diction is more narrative.

Thomas returns to the origins of his life, and humanity. He evokes his childhood memories and connects them to the creation myth of Adam and Eve. The fairy tale genre is evoked through the lines of “once below a time” (7), making the childhood memories sound as something distant and perhaps made-up. This is a deliberate technique of Thomas, as he creates an analogy between his own happy childhood and an adult life where he saw the impact of World War Two. This is compared to Genesis and the loss of innocence as sin separated man from God. However, in “Fern Hill” war is distant, and Thomas engages with florid idealisations of his summers at Aunt Annie’s farm. The “fire” from the war poems of *D&E* is not connected to death in “Fern Hill”. Instead it is evoked through the children’s games of setting fire to dry grass: “And fire green as grass” (22).

The poem starts by using the adverb “now”, which indicates present time, even though these are recollections of the poet’s childhood. At the same time it functions as a discourse marker to introduce a new topic: “Now as I was young and easy” (1). Multiple lines start with “And” (6, 7, 10, 15, 16, etc.), resembling a child’s rendering of events, as well as pointing to the interconnectedness of things. The poet is depicted as “green,” alluding to the “green genesis” (8) of “Today, this Insect”. It also picks up green as something fresh, albeit transient, as in “The Force that Through the Green Fuse” from *18 Poems*. The poem is “golden” (5) due to the light of the sun. The sun as a homophone for Son is a recurrent metaphor used in Thomas’s poetry. Christ the Son of God is present in Thomas’s childhood evocations: “And the sun grew around that very day” (32).

The persona the poet creates is strongly involved in “Fern Hill”. The pronoun “I” is repeated 13 times, six times more than “I, in my Intricate Image”. This points to the metapoetic features of “Fern Hill”; the poet is “spinning” (34) things into existence. The poem connects this to “the birth of the first simple light / In the first, spinning place” (33-34). The analogy found in “I, in my Intricate Image,” where poetry, religion, and nature are more or less the same thing, is revisited. Each stanza has a concluding line, indicating that a period of the speaker’s life has made yet a turn, for example: “In the pebbles of the holy streams” (18). In the latter line as well as: “On to the fields of praise”, religion is embedded in nature. In the same way that the seasons turn, the poet grows older in the course of “Fern Hill”.

“Fern Hill” is a celebration of childhood and innocence. Ackerman (1991) asserts that “Thomas defines the Christian state of grace and salvation by reference to the New Testament emphasis on childhood as being closest to the kingdom of heaven (“Except ye be converted

and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven”)” (p. 93). As in “Poem in October” religion is embedded in nature: “And the sabbath rang slowly / In the pebbles of the holy streams” (17). Nature as a living part of Creation celebrates this summer joy: “On to the fields of praise”. The metaphor of prayer as climbing as introduced in “The Conversation of Prayers” is picked up in “Fern Hill”: “Time let me hail and climb / Golden in the heydays of his eyes” (4-5). The possessive pronoun “his” is refers to the creation of nature and the poet, and is repeated throughout the poem.

Thomas, once again, draws the line from the elaborations of Genesis in *TFP*, as he clearly confesses in “Ceremony after a Fire-Raid”: “I know the legend / Of Adam and Eve is never for a second / Silent in my service” (47-49). In fact, Thomas is explicit about the allusion to Genesis: “Shining, it was Adam and maiden”. Thomas compares his state of ecstasy to the Creation: “So it must have been after the birth of the simple light / In the first, spinning place”.

As the first stanza starts with a “climb” (4), the last stanza ends up in a “loft” (47) similar to the one of “The Conversation of Prayers”. The last stanza also picks up the analogy of sleep as a death: “Nor that riding to sleep / I should hear him fly with the high fields / And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land” (49-51). With knowledge of the dead infants of *D&E* this becomes a pun where the poet cannot turn back time from these atrocities, nor come back to his own childhood. The poet is awakened from this epiphany to find himself in post-World War Two Britain. As “The Force that Through the Green Fuse” also is a force of destruction, the poet finds himself “green and dying” (53). The final line “Though I sang in my chains like the sea” (54) is a powerful statement of a poet who evokes the power of nature and music to celebrate the state of innocence and glory “in the mercy of his means”. It is, equally, the self-referential gesture back to the poet from “I, in my Intricate Image” whose creation was his destruction.

“Fern Hill” picks up the paradoxes seen in *D&E* as a whole, where the moment of birth is also a kind of death. The poem is a celebration of religion, nature and poetry as an all-encompassing force. “Fern Hill” uses elements of the fairy-tale genre to create a vivid and magic atmosphere of joy and innocence. Thomas, again, evokes the well-known creation myths of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and likens his own childhood to this state. It is a mourning Thomas who yet acknowledges a post-world war world, and crafts some of his poems as prayers.

4. Conclusion

Through the progression of ten years (1936-1946), World War Two left a scorching mark on Britain. Thomas insists that all of his poem were written in praise of God, as seen in the introduction. The rebellious imageries connected to religion in for instance *TFP* made critics, such as Shapiro and Wain, argue that his poetry was not religious. They are, to some extent, right in their assertions that Thomas's poetry is not religious in the conventional form that they might expect. Nevertheless, we have seen throughout these two collections the theme of creation and destruction at the same time; the images are raised and shattered at the same time, and so is Christ. This, however, does not mean that Thomas dismisses the notion of Christianity, as he evokes creation myths through both collections. Thomas's use of religion is, therefore, more than ornamental, as it conveys a religious experience. The reader may appreciate the poetry as religious to a greater extent by identifying that religion, man, nature and poetry in Thomas are more or less the same thing, deriving from the same source. The religious poems of Thomas thus embrace "an experience of ultimate reality" in keeping with RS Thomas's definition. The Modernistic features of *TFP*, conveyed vastly through imagery, alter as the style of *D&E* is realised through a freer verse form, enjambment and experimentalism with for instance genres. This points to the thematic progression of Thomas's poetry: he is more at peace with his relationship to creation and destruction; beginnings and ends; and deaths and entrances.

With exception of clarity in diction, Thomas's poetry from *TFP* to *D&E* experiences a development and continuity in style and theme. His message becomes much clearer as his lexical density is rendered more specific. This relates to the theme of religion, seeing as Thomas moves from an obscure to a pantheistic relationship with God, meaning that the Christian God becomes visible in everything, supporting RS Thomas's notion of religion and ultimate reality. He gains poetic clarity as he suffers the vision of a World War Two poet. Through this progression, he is able to find more consolation, as World War Two is ended by "Fern Hill". In *Twenty-Five Poems* this sexual imagery is connected to that of sin. Yet, Thomas retains his use of sexual imagery intertwined with religious imagery. He is convinced that sexual energy is, like nature, a powerful force that drives through everything. Ackerman (1966) argues that "in Donne, Herbert, Traherne, Vaughan, and Thomas the introspective consciousness is characterized by a deep sense of sin and of separation from God. Donne's *Holy Sonnets*, Herbert's *The Temple*, Thomas's "Altarwise by Owl-Light," "There was a

Saviour,” and “Vision and Prayer,” all record the attempt to heal this separation” (p. 42). As seen from Ackerman’s selection, it becomes clear that this healing came later in Thomas’s life. He is able to acknowledge and live with the brutal experience of the 20th century, as well as his doubt and confusion. Ultimately, he manages to strike a balance between absolute dissolution and naïve retrogression; he “sang in [his] chains like the sea”. This sea voyage of experiment and destruction has reached the shores of consolation. Daiches argues that: “only later in life came the realization that such destruction is no destruction, but a guarantee of immortality, of perpetual life in a cosmic eternity” (1966: 17).

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