



International Journal of English Language and Literature Studies

ISSN(e): 2306-0646/ISSN(p): 2306-9910

URL: www.aessweb.com



DYLAN THOMAS'S DEATHS AND ENTRANCES: THE POET'S RULING ENERGY



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ABSTRACT

Dylan Thomas's Deaths and Entrances offers a more searching examination of the poet's ruling energy and the direction of his activity. With the outbreak of the Second World War, the privilege as a poet also increases his anxiety and responsibility. Thomas seeks to integrate experiences and comprehend the nature of reality, and he also searches for a mode of release from mortal misery. While W.H. Auden, recognizing the value of Kierkegaardian existential philosophy as an avenue to truth, expresses his distrust of the adequacy and authenticity of sensory and imaginative perceptions. The dichotomy remains unresolved in the case of Auden's contemporaries, Cecil Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, and Louis MacNeice despite their attempt to reconcile the contraries. The divided attitude of the War poets, F.T. Prince, Roy Fuller, Alan Rook, and Keidrych Rhys towards the poetic process of Auden and Thomas indicates the direction of their mind and also implies a value judgement. Walford Davies writes that "after all, attitude and tone can remain richly problematic in poems considered much less difficult than Thomas's at first reading." Thomas's "later poems abound in Christian thought and symbol" according to John Ackerman. The syntactical structure, the vocabulary, construction, and cadence of Thomas's poems have been analysed in detail by, among others, W. Y. Tindall, Clark Emery, John Bayley, and James A. Davies. The critical studies on Thomas's later poem, as they remain general, partial and incomplete, have not taken the readers to its central focus. Hence a semantic analysis of Deaths and Entrance is undertaken here to unravel its total meaning suggestive of Thomas's ruling energy, his effective functioning as a poet in the war time.

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Keywords: Predicament, Mutable, Reconcile, Dominion, Repudiate, Sustenance, Divination, Appraisal, Relentless, Disinterested.

Received: 13 June 2015/ **Revised:** 19 September 2015/ **Accepted:** 27 September 2015/ **Published:** 3 October 2015

Contribution/ Originality

The paper contributes the first logical analysis of Thomas's functional role and life-oriented commitment as a poet of *Deaths and Entrances* consoling and sustaining the depressed poets of the thirties and the ignorant war poets of the forties with the resources of the poet's ruling energy.

1. INTRODUCTION

The poets of the thirties and the forties, during the Second World War time, were confronted with the problem of communication for want of common aims and a common language. The War poets' dilemma was about how genuine poetry was to be differentiated from the spurious kind. Louis MacNeice voices, their bewilderment:

Patriots, dreamers, diehards, theoreticians, all,
Can't we ever, my love, speak in the same language,
Or shall we go, still quarrelling over words, to the wall?
Have we no aims in common? (*Collected Poems* 228)

Linda M. Shires in her survey of the poetry of the Second World War writes that "Brooke's typically naïve patriotism could hold no meaning for the young poets of the early forties. It interfered with more important and enduring interests: love, art, and for some, the pleasures of university life. As war stole their youth, so it also destroyed the intellectual communities which might have served their common aims" (57).

The War poet Sidney Keyes evaluates the groping mood of the War poets, F.T . Prince, Roy Fuller, Alan Rook, Keidrych Rhys and their songs of innocence and experience, life and death, hope and unhope. Echoing Wilfred Owen's poetics as revealed in the poem "Insensibility," "whatever mourns when many leave their shores ... whatever shares ... the eternal reciprocity of tears" (*Contemporary Verse*122), Keyes had censured the morbid element in the war-time poetry:

... quick hands in darkness, groping
Pluck the sad harp; sad heart forever hoping
Valhalla may be songless, enter
The moment of your glory, out of clamour
Moulding your vision to such harmony
That drunken heroes cannot choose but honour
Your stubborn blinded pride, your inward winter.(*CV* 320)

In the poem "Insensibility," Owen is commenting on the sensual and sentimental language of his five contemporary War poets, Ian Hamilton, Rupert Brooke, Charles Sorley, Isaac Rosenberg, and Edward Thomas, who "by choice ... made themselves immune ... to pity and what moans in man ... before the last sea and hapless stars," defines what is not poetry:

But cursed are dullards whom no cannon stuns,
That they should be as stones;
Wretched are they, and mean
With paucity that never was simplicity. (*CV*)

Dylan Thomas's poem "When All My Five and Country Senses See" throws light on the direction of the Second World War poets's insensibility and their "old men's placidity" between the "five senses." He comments: "And when blind sleep drops on the spying senses, / The heart is sensual, though five eyes break" (*Poems* 146).

Thomas's *Deaths and Entrances* (1946) offers a more searching examination of the poet's ruling energy and the direction of his activity. With the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the privilege as a poet also increases his anxiety and responsibility. He explores in what ways he can play an effective, functional role in society. The question becomes related to the ultimate problem of man's salvation, and the poet's own creative journey becomes at the same time explorative of man's destiny. Cecil Day Lewis explains the double vision of Thomas: "Their doubles draw the willows, a brown mare / Drinks her reflection. There's no margin where / Substance leaves off, the illusory begins" (*Collected Poems* 247). In *18 Poems*, Thomas articulates the perplexities in human experience, and the perplexities are all related to the central question of poet's place in the universe and his ultimate destiny:

Especially when the October wind
With frosty fingers punishes my hair,
Caught by the crabbing sun I walk on fire
And cast a shadow crab upon the land,

By the sea's side, hearing the noise of birds,
Hearing the raven cough in winter sticks,
My busy heart who shudders as she talks
Sheds the syllabic blood and drains her words. (*Poems* 53)

The poignancy of the poet's situation, in *25 Poems*, arises out of the fundamental duality in his nature. Man, as Thomas notes in the poem "I, in My Intricate Image," shares the instinctiveness that characterizes other animals; but he also possesses a spiritual power that tends to purify his animal nature and that distinguishes him from creatures of a lower order:

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, immortal,
I, in my fusion of rose and male motion,
Create this twin miracle. (73)

Man, in short, has a creative consciousness that seeks to explore reality and aspires to a world beyond this temporal order in quest of freedom. Thomas projects the theme of *The Map of Love*:

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,
Lie watching yellow until the golden weather
Breaks, O my heart's blood, like a heart and hill.(145)

The transitional poem refrains the melody of moral disinterestedness voiced in the early poem, "A Process in the Weather of the Heart":

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.(17)

The poet, again, is the most privileged among men; he has the power of articulation and can give his visions and insights enduring forms. In *Deaths and Entrances*, Thomas underlines the core issue of transmutation:

It was my thirtieth
Year to heaven stood there, then in the summer noon
Though the town below lay leaved with October blood.
O may my heart's truth
Still be sung
On this high hill in a year's turning.(116)

Thomas no longer aspires to permanence because earthly and mortal existence is considered the ultimate reality, and salvation in the altered perspective, seems to point to a condition of experience "alive and warm" in which the mind confronts misery envisaging all the circumstances of the poets of the thirties as well as the war poets of the forties. He speaks of his poetic strength:

One enemy, of many, who knows well
Your heart is luminous
In the watched dark, quivering through locks and caves,
Will pull the thunderbolts
To shut the sun, plunge, mount your darkened keys
And sear just riders back,
Until that one loved least
Looms the last Samson of your zodiac.(47)

In *Last Poems* (1923), Houseman rejects the analytical, metaphysical approach, “the laws of God, the laws of man” (Houseman 66), “think no more; ‘tis only thinking ... lays lads underground” (79). Defending the value of unintegrated sensations, “Oh, ‘tis jesting, dancing, drinking ... spins the heavy world around,” he sings:

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the Woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow. (AEH 36)

Houseman grapples with various approaches to meet the challenges of the human predicament for “twice a week the winter thorough”; there is “no harm in trying” to fight “sorrow” to “keep the goal” and “trying to be glad” in contrast to “little mirth” that “keeps the bones of man from lying ... on the bed of earth” (83). But if pain be inescapable in human destiny, this pain must be made meaningful. Houseman states:

June suns, you cannot store them
To warm the winter’s cold,
The lad that hopes for heaven
Shall fill his mouth with mold.(24)

His ideals of positive significance of pain gives a new turn to Thomas’s search for salvation in *Deaths and Entrances*.

Day Lewis has rightly observed that much of Thomas’s work is concerned with the nature and function of poetry itself, and the problems are presented sharply in the poetic testament *Deaths and Entrances*. He compares and contrasts:

... a thousand repetitions
Of a routine immemorial, each unique,
While the horn hummed like autumn in the blood
Always a field before him, or after him.
Till at last the came to the verge of the sea, where hunter
And hunted face the effacing and are one. (DCP)

MacNeice defines the paradoxical poetic power of Thomas’s later poems:

There was a tower that went before a fall.
Can’t we ever, my love, speak in the same language?
Its nerves grew worse and worse as it grew tall.
Have we no aims in common? (MCP)

Thomas’s quest for a human recourse as a convincing solution to the problem of human predicament and all other aftereffects of the war as revealed in *Deaths and Entrances* written under the influence of A.E. Houseman is twofold: he seeks to integrate experiences and comprehend the nature of reality, and he also searches for a mode of release from mortal misery. Day Lewis in *Poems 1943-47* (1947), MacNeice in *The Last Ditch* (1940), *Plant and*

Phantom (1941), and *Spring Board* (1944), and Stephen Spender in *Ruins and Visions* (1942), *Spiritual Exercises* (1943) and *Poems of Dedications* (1944) are conscious of the danger that their visionary imagination may delude them into fantasies and deprive them of their moorings in life. Their main concern is how can they remain a pure poet and reconcile their commitment as an artist with their obligation as a human being? They “were bickering over beads,” “the more there are together, Togetherness recedes” (*MCP*). The time-conscious poets of the thirties could not “speak in the same language” as they had “no aims in common” in the war-ridden time of the forties. W.H. Auden evokes the pains of mortality in the transitional poem *Another Time* and in the longer poems of the middle phase. In *Another Time*, he conveys his anxiety if poetry is to be justified as something meaningful and not dismissed as a fanciful construction, how should a poet use his special faculty?:

Wrapped in a yielding air, beside
The flower’s soundless hunger,
Close to the tree’s clandestine tide,
Close to the bird’s high fever,
Loud in his hope and anger,
Erect about his skeleton,
Stands the expressive lover,
Stands the deliberate man. (15)

Auden’s reflective lyrics in *Another Time* represent one kind of introspective vision. This vision, though delightful, is much too fragile and dependent on subjective response; and being completely divorced from reality, it does not meet the poet’s need and the challenge of the human predicament, “past pitheads ... where steam puffed out in a squall of imprecation ... with a coursed hare’s ... demented doublings and the closed circuit ... of the electric hare... (Day Lewis *Collected Poems* 254). His pilgrimage projected in the form of an estranged vision, “a glooming light, a gleaming darkness shroud ... its passage ... all seems tranquil, all in tune...” (*DCP*), is analogous to the vision in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, “and sole apart retired, the Soldan fierce” (16), and is incorporated into the pilgrimage myth used in the early work *Poems*. *Another Time* is not, however, a mere recast of the original narrative of historic sense. This is indeed an altogether different poem, the change is manifest both in the mode of presentation and conceptual orientation. Auden himself vouchsafes for this:

No wonder then so many die of grief,
So many are so lonely as they die;
No one has yet believed or liked a lie,
Another time has other lives to live. (*Another Time* 62)

The objective, impersonal, aural grandeur of *Look Stranger!* is here replaced by an inward vision, and there is a coalescence of the personal and the impersonal. With this shift in focus, the poem acquires symbolic dimensions and partakers of the mystery that it attempts to probe and reveal.

Auden recognizes the value of Kierkegaardian existential philosophy as an avenue to truth, to “further griefs and greater.” Thomas explains in the title poem “Deaths and Entrances”:

Of your immortal friends
Who’d raise the organs of the counted dust
To shoot and sing your praise,
One who called deepest down shall hold his peace
That cannot sink or cease
Endlessly to his wound
In many married London’s estranging grief. (47)

In *Another Time* Auden, adopting the satirical and eclectic approach of the French Symbolist Rilke, slips “out of his own position ... into an unconcerned condition” (18) and designs “the defeat of grief ” (16), the most loved Thomas to win back his position, to win over his contemporaries and the War poets and win through in the end. He is no longer deviating or departing from the Eliotian stand but bidding time to reinforce and sustain his position through chameleonic approach. Auden explains:

Like love we don't know where or why
Like love we can't compel or fly
Like love we often weep
Like love we seldom keep. (AT 19)

Commenting on Auden's approach as a satirist, MacNeice records:

Who is the man with the handshake? Don't you know;
He is the pinprick master, he can dissect
All your moods and manners, he can discover
A selfish motive for anything—and collect
His royalties as recording angel. No
Reverence here for hero, saint or lover. (232)

Day Lewis describes the Auden's design “with hieratic gestures” in an ironical manner to play “subtly” the role of “the suppliant, priest, interpreter.” He projects Auden “wooing” the “virtue” of poetic justice and the ruling energy of Walter de la Mare, T.S. Eliot, and Rilke:

I know the curious hands are shaping, reshaping the image
Of what is only an image of things impalpable.
I feel how the eyes strain
To catch a truth behind the oracular presence—
Eyes that augur through stone.(264)

This thoughtful and quiet power, born of a sense of resignation to man's ultimate destiny from which no escape is possible, is reflected in the sonnet “Edward Lear” in which Auden explains that “the uncritical relations of the dead” carries an expressive phrase, “left by his friend to breakfast alone on the white ... Italian shore” (AT 25). The poems on People, Places and Occasions represent, in a sense, Auden's highest poetic achievement, but this volume points to a new direction of his poetry. “Towards the end he sailed into an extraordinary mildness ... anchored in his home and reached his wife ... as though his occupation were another island,” “Goodness existed,” “the unexplained survivor breaking off the nightmare ... all that was intricate and false ... the truth was simple” (33), “beleaguered by the same ... negation and despair ... show an affirming flame” (115). The heavily laden diction of the *Poems* (1928), *Poems* (1930), and of *Look Stranger!* is discarded in favour of a mellow austerity in *Another Time*.

2. REVIEWS, METHODS AND OBJECTIVES

Walford Davies writes that “after all, attitude and tone can remain richly problematic in poems considered much less difficult than Thomas's at first reading.” Thomas's “later poems abound in Christian thought and symbol” according to John Ackerman. The syntactical structure, the vocabulary, construction, and cadence of Thomas's poems have been analysed in detail by, among others, W.Y.Tindall, Clark Emery, John Bayley, and James A. Davies; and William T. Moynihan studies the actual method of Thomas's craftsmanship. The critical studies on Thomas's later poem, as they remain general, partial and incomplete, have not taken the readers to its central focus. Hence a semantic analysis of *Deaths and Entrances* is undertaken here to unravel its total meaning suggestive of Thomas's ruling energy, his disinterested functioning as a poet in the war-ridden time.

3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Pain, Auden affirms in *Another Time*, heightens consciousness-- "Hell is neither here nor there / Hell is not anywhere / Hell is hard to bear" (32)-- and in the process liberates the mind from the bondage of experience:

Only the challenge to our will,
Our pride in learning any skill
Sustains our effort to be ill.(*AT*)

Here the readers can note a departure from the assumption which underlies the early poems that to conquer misery one must escape from awareness itself. The dichotomy remains unresolved in the case of Auden's contemporaries, Day Lewis, Spender, and MacNeice and the War poets, Prince, Fuller, Rook, Rhys, Alun Lewis and Keyes "locking, unlocking, the murdered strangers weave," despite their attempt to reconcile the contraries. Thomas explains:

Turns in the dark on the sound they know will arise
Into the answering skies from the green ground,
From the man on the stairs and the child by his bed,
The sound about to be said in the two prayers
For the sleep in a safe land and the love who dies...(*Poems* 126)

The different modes of release from mutability that the War poets explore centre on the problem of self-consciousness, the problem of transcending war-afflicted time and finding their identity as eternal poets. Prince's attempt to perpetuate Auden's aesthetic doctrine that a poet has no identity assumes the language of sentiments and affectiveness, "... the other full of tears that she will be dead." But Auden's impersonal theory of poetry, "self-sacrifice" or aesthetic disinterestedness involves a psychic distancing from sensations, which carries with it an assurance of freedom. T.S. Eliot writes that "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but it is an escape from emotion; it is not an expression of personality, but an extinction of personality" (*English Critical Tradition* 176).

Thomas's ideal of the evolutionary march of consciousness resulting in the emergence of qualitatively higher species seems no longer tenable to Auden, and the knowledge of man's inescapable tragic destiny necessitates a new religion and also an appraisal of the older religions. Thomas introduces his antithesis:

On almost the incendiary eve
Of several near deaths,
When one at the great least of your best loved
And always known must leave
Lions and fires of his flying breath...(*Poems*)

Auden, however, recognizes the possibility of an extension in man's consciousness. This increase in awareness does not alter the material facts of life—man still remains a mortal creature and bears the load of pain—but it affords a clearer view of the reality of suffering. Thomas recasts Auden's pursuit of the intellectual soul in *Poems* and *Look Stranger!*:

On almost the incendiary eve
Of deaths and entrances,
When near and strange wounded on London's waves
Have sought your single grave...(*Poems*)

In *Another Time*, the poet is seen as a lonely pilgrim in search of the meaning of life; but the poem also carries a severe indictment of retreat, dream, and illusion, and, by implication, of the idea of personal salvation. Thomas, in the opening poem "The Conversation of Prayer," evaluates that it is not clear how the rest of suffering humanity can share Auden's understanding:

The conversation of prayers about to be said
By the child going to bed and the man on the stairs
Who climbs to his dying love in her high room,
The one not caring to whom in his sleep he will move
And the other full of tears that she will be dead... (*Poems*)

Auden is not sure of his divination as the War poet Prince “lies alone and still ... innocent between two wars”: “golden dissolving under the water veil,” “a she bird ... sings to the treading hawk ... carrion, paradise,” “a blade of grass longs with the meadow... a stone lies lost and locked in the lark-high hill.” Thomas brings out the divided love of Prince:

With the incestuous secret brother in the seconds to perpetuate the stars,
A man torn up mourns in the sole night,
And the second comers, the severers, the enemies from the deep
Forgotten dark, rest their pulse and bury their dead in her faithless
sleep. (*Poems*88)

Whereas Fuller, Rook, and Rhys emulating the poetic strength of Thomas blessed him with immortality unasked and unsolicited. After a few poems, they address the poetry of Thomas with a celebrant’s ardour. Thomas remembers in the poem “The Hunchback in the Garden”:

All night in the unmade park
After the railings and shrubberies
The birds the grass the trees the lake
And the wild boys innocent as strawberries
Had followed the hunchback
To his kennel in the dark.(*Poems*)

That the poetry of Thomas is a thing of supreme value is a recurrent motif in the poems of Rook, Rhys, and Fuller written after the outbreak of the war. The most dominant thought in Prince’s poems is the eternal poetry of Auden.

It may be assumed from Lewis’s poem *Raiders Dawn* (1942) that after his spiritual rebirth he would write the kind of poetry identical to Siegfried Sassoon’s vision that would transmit his agony and comprehension of the mystery of suffering. In *The Iron Laurel*, Keyes hopes that he would thus share with the fellow-mortals the insight that he gains from Owen’s “Strange Meeting” and the scenes of the past that he unfolds. The emerging pattern in Prince’s *Poems* (1938) is complex; and although the poetry of other War poets-- Fuller’s *The Middle of a War* (1942), Rook’s *Soldiers, This Solitude* (1942) and Rhys’s *The Van Pool, and Other Poems* (1942)-- is a testament of faith in Thomas’s *18 Poems*, perplexities persist. Thomas comments on the complexities of the War poets:

On almost the incendiary eve
When at your lips and keys,
Locking, unlocking, the murdered strangers weave,
One who is most unknown,
Your polestar neighbor, sun of another street,
Will dive up to his tears.(*Poems*)

It is a matter of pity that the poets of the Second World War were not actively identical with the poets of pity active in the First World War, “not with mingling tears ... nor one long backward look of woe ... towards a sinking trust ... a heyday’s afterglow ... not even in the lash and lightning ... cautery of rage...” (*DCP* 260). However, “the common experiences of war drew these young people together and defined their generation; yet the keynote of the

1940s was one of personal expression. Some were overwhelmed by the chaos around them, some felt their identities threatened or lost as they played out roles in a cosmic drama. Almost all of them ... walked the fine line between active participation and the detachment necessary for sanity” (Shires). But by their “slow ... fissure, this blind numb grinding severance ... of floe from floe” they proved themselves as poets of un pity and private and passive suffering anticipating the poetic vision of Edmund Blunden and Edward Thomas. Day Lewis comments: “Merciless god, to mock your failures so!” He doubts about the War poets’s concerns and tone:

Alas, hull-down upon hope’s ashen verge
Hasten the vessel that our joined hands launched,
Stretching my heart-strings out beyond endurance.
Ah, will they never snap? Can I not climb
The signal hill, and wave, and *mean* goodbye? (*DCP*)

The Second World War started “as a war of nerves ... stunned the imagination instead of liberating it. There was no development from initial optimism about war to rejection of it, a development clearly evident in the poetry of the First World War” (Shires 53).

The direction of socially conscious poets, Day Lewis, Spender, and MacNeice is clearly towards a firmer commitment to reality, but the visionary aspiration is not totally repudiated. Thomas evaluates their divided attitude towards the war, public and private love:

Will be the same grief flying. Whom shall they calm?
Shall the child sleep unharmed or the man be crying?
The conversation of prayers about to be said
Turns on the quick and the dead, and the man on the stair
To-night shall find no dying but alive and warm.... (*Poems*)

In *Deaths and Entrances*, Thomas as a poet of “fierce and froward thing” proceeds and gains increasingly a clarity of understanding; but this clarity is attended by a deepening sense of mystery, and the final impression is akin to religious awe. He explains himself:

In the fire of his care his love in the high room.
And the child not caring to whom he climbs his prayer
Shall drown in a grief as deep as his made grave,
And mark the dark eyed wave, through the eyes of sleep,
Dragging him up the stairs to one who lies dead.(*Poems*)

Day Lewis, singing in praise of Thomas’s poetry, comments:

Sure, from such warped beginnings
Nothing debonair
Can come? But neither shame nor panic,
Drugs nor sharp despair
Could uproot that untoward thing,
That all too fierce and frowardthing.... (263)

In contrast, even while Auden seems to attain to enlightenment, he continues to feel the almost unbearable weight of the load of mortality in *Another Time* that condemns satirically the sceptical poetry and its tradition, “earth an empty rind,” “a furtive thing,” “a loveless, damned, abortive thing ... this flurry of the groaning dust, and what it left behind...” (*DCP*). The vision embodied in Auden’s impersonal art liberates the depressed mind of Prince, at least momentarily, from the bondage of experience, but its impact is terrifying. Auden experiences awe at Prince’s

partial revelation of the mystery and the pain of incomprehension. Day Lewis renders the exploratory fragment that expresses Auden's distrust of the adequacy and authenticity of sensory and imaginative perceptions:

Seldom had the seed of man
So charmed, so clear a start.
And he was born as frail a one,
As ailing, freakish, pale a one
As ever the wry planets knotted their beams to thwart. (DCP)

Apparently the tone of Prince is calm, but this calm is not expressive of serenity achieved through a resolution of doubts and complexities. The quester's accent bears the stresses of the purgatorial climb; even when he reaches what seems to be the end of the pilgrimage—or, at least the end of a phase—the prospect that Prince holds out before him is of endless travail.

In the middle phase, Auden's vision of human reality becomes increasingly tragic and ironic. The sources of the tragedy, he realizes, is not merely the finite and mortal condition of man but also man's creative consciousness. The irony is that the poets of pity, Day Lewis, Spender, and MacNeice turned to comforts and philosophy during the time of disastrous war which reminded them that the creative man or poet has to pay a price for his unique privilege. Whereas the transfiguring mind of Thomas has been persistently ringing that pain inherent in the human condition can be transformed into moments of ecstasy. His central focus in the poem "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London" is on the speculative mood of the fellow-poets and the poem is the fruit of his mature reflections, but the search for the positive meaning in social or public pain may be traced much earlier in his *18 Poems*. Day Lewis is partly right when he says that Thomas's early poetry can be regarded as an attempt to find a justification for suffering. And with poignant clarity, he could perceive the meaning of Thomas's suffering:

Death mask of a genius unborn:
Tragic prince of a rejected play:
Soul of suffering that bequeathed no myth:
A dark tower and a never-sounded horn.
Call him what we will, words cannot ennoble
This Atlas who fell down under a bubble.(DCP292)

Thomas is destined to suffer as Yeats and Hardy were. His life is an allegory, and the allegory is illustrated in his poems.

Thomas felt that the secret of creation in the poetry of John Donne and Auden, "the longing sighs ... mute and dull of cheer and pale" (*AEH*), "the word ... from the solid bases of the light ... abstracted all the letters of the void," was death-centric and metaphysical and quite averse to the life-oriented and man-centric poetic tradition of Thomas Hardy and W.B. Yeats, "the cloudy bases of the breath ... translating to the heart ... first characters of birth and death." That he strikes a discordant note even in his early phase is equally evident in *18 Poems*:

In the beginning was the secret brain.
The brain was celled and soldered in the thought
Before the pitch was forking to a sun;
Before the veins were shaking in their sieve,
Blood shot and scattered to the winds of light
The ribbed original of love. (83)

Thomas shows an awareness of the "lovers' ills," "the wan look, the hollow tone ... the hung head, the sunken bone" (*AEH*) in *18 Poems*:

These boys of light are curdlers in their folly,

Sour the boiling honey;
The jacks of frost they finger in the hives;
There in the sun the frigid threads
Of doubt and dark they feed their nerves;
The signal moon is zero in their voids. (71)

But the dominant thought in the early phase is that the chief task of a poet is to explore and establish the hidden correspondence between experiences of suffering and creation. *18 Poems* generates life of joy among the grief-stricken poets of the thirties through the process of death and creation, “the gushers of the sky ... spout to the rod ... divining in a smile the oil of tears,” “day light the bone,” “the skinning gales unpin ... the winter’s robes,” “the film of spring is hanging from the lids,” “light breaks on secret lots,” “blood jumps in the sun,” and “above the waste allotments the dawn halts.” He breaks out:

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

Thomas’s early poems provide sensational and exciting “tips of thought” to destroy and create “when logics die.” The misery and the afflictions confronted by the Lefties of the thirties, Day Lewis, Spender, and MacNeice nerved the creative spirit of the young Thomas. He was brave enough to volunteer for their uncomfortable hours, and created *18 Poems* to heal their ills.

Thomas tried the resources of his transfiguring mind and transmuted the mute sufferings that Day Lewis, Spender, and MacNeice had experienced in their love of Auden’s musical art into the sonnet sequence, “Altarwise by Owl-Light”: “Faith in their hands shall snap in two, / And the unicorn evils run them through; / Split all ends up they shan’t crack; / And death shall have no dominion” (31). Gradually, they came to realize that life must be undergone. In *25 Poems*, Thomas sings in praise of life and creation:

Where blew a flower may a flower no more
Lift its head to the blows of the rain;
Though they be mad and dead as nails,
Heads of the characters hammer through the daisies;
Break in the sun till the sun breaks down,
And death shall have no dominion. (*Poems*)

Thomas portrays the self-conscious War poets’s “wan and weedy ... showing” and “galloping blight,” their dilemmas between the forces of historic sense and poetic culture, tradition and individual talent, transcendental reality and innate reality. Salvation to suffering must be found, he asserts in *The Map of Love*, in mortal existence itself. He brings out the “bitter wisdom” (*Yeats*236) born of existential suffering placed against the “bitter glory” (215) attained through existential knowledge. He understands from his poetic ancestors Hardy and Yeats that suffering is inescapable:

After the feast of tear-stuffed time and thistles
In a room with a stuffed fox and stale fern,
I stand, for this memorial’s sake, alone
In the snivelling hours with dead.... (*Poems* 25)

In *Deaths and Entrances*, Thomas realizes, under the influence of the delightful guide Houseman, that suffering must be made meaningful and significant, sustaining and consoling. "In the fire of his care his love in the high room."

Thomas's realization is attended by the discovery of the significance of pain in the poem "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London." The opening lines of the poem, made of four stanzas, convey this mental state in which the immediate setting of the fellow-poets--"the mankind making," "bird beast and flower ... fathering," "all humbling darkness," "the last light breaking," "the still hour," and "the sea tumbling in darkness"--takes on a strange appearance, looking both near and distant, both familiar and unreal. Thomas reasserts:

Never until the mankind making
Bird beast and flower
Fathering and all humbling darkness
Tells with silence the last light breaking
And the still hour
Is come of the sea tumbling in harness.... (18)

In the 1940s, Thomas had been continually and firmly dissociating himself from political and social concerns (John Press 68).The thought of mourning the death of a child annuls the conscious self and induces the reverie. The sensation of having dreamed all this long ago in *18 Poems* is part of his experience. "Her flowers in vision flame, her forest trees / Lift burdened branches, stilled with ecstasies" (de la Mare 199).

The final resolution in *For the Time Being* indicates Auden's return to the earlier aesthetics.Thomas imagines Auden as the priest entering the great Cathedral of the Zion mountains and mourning, as moving to the Christian social order and the Church in which that order is codified:

And I must enter again the round
Zion of the water bead
And the synagogue of the ear of corn
Shall I let pray the shadow of a sound
Or sow my salt seed
In the least valley of sackcloth to mourn
The majesty and burning of the child's death.(*Poems*)

In this sense, Auden's Christian vision of order, his faith in the penitential way to redemption is a significant achievement, the consummation of a long, sometimes arid and fearful, journey. The birth of Christ holds out great hope to human race and His Crucifixion underlines the value of physical sacrifice to attain spiritual heights. The time being i.e. the human life between birth and death, occasions the possibility of forging the severed links with God. The advent of Christ is seen as the advent of truth, a truth which in its transcendence of all other truths upsets man's easy assumptions concerning the nature of reality. "When music sounds, gone is the earth I know, / And all her lovely things even lovelier grow... (de la Mare).

The time-conscious poets, Day Lewis, Spender, and MacNeice "wrapt in the gross clay, bereft of life's breath" were totally self-complacent and self-conscious.To adapt the words of de la Mare:

When music sounds, out of the water rise
Naiads whose beauty dims my waking eyes,
Rapt in strange dreams burns each enchanted face,
With solemn echoing stirs their dwelling-place. (de la Mare)

The reaction of the War poets, Prince, Fuller, Rook, and Rhys to the child's death was indifference and ignorance as they were very much obsessed with private experiences. The nightmarish experience was over, and the pull of the

anchor of Sassoon and Owen proved strong enough to bring the private mind of Lewis and Keyes back to the tragic reality of war; but the assurance carried no final certitude. Thomas remembers:

Secret by the unmourning water
Of the riding Thames
After the first death, there is no other. (*Poems*)

Here the readers can note a clear repudiation and an indirect acceptance of the earlier aesthetic, Owen's "truth untold ... the pity of war, the pity war distilled" (CV123) as the War poets, Prince, Fuller, Rook, and Rhys thought that Owen's poetry of "untold truth" and "the pity of war" was a disservice and death to poetry and as Lewis and Keyes instinctively found in Sassoon and Owen a hope for poetry. An adapted passage brings out the divided love of the War poets in an appropriate manner:

When music sounds, all that I was I am
Ere to this haunt of brooding dust I came;
While from Time's woods break into distant song
The swift-winged hours, as I hasten along. (de la Mare)

Fuller, Rook, and Rhys recognize two limiting factors in Auden's elegance, the inescapable fact of aesthetic transcendence and irony that conditions human nature and human progress: the cunningness or dissimulation that man shares with the animal fox, "a bad coin in your socket," "a winning air," "twinkling bits of the eye," and "the sweet tooth of my love." Thomas repeats:

That though I loved them for their faults
As much as for their good,
My friends were enemies on stilts
With their heads in a cunning cloud.(*Poems* 138)

And yet while acknowledging these limitations on Auden's irony as the principle of structure, the War poets perceive that Thomas's ruling energy could resurrect and regenerate the artistic structure and poetic character of his fellow-poets far above animal instinctiveness, that this inner force in his paradoxical, magnanimous structure is evident in his sonnets "Altarwise by Owlwise-Light," "Gag of dumbstruck tree to block from bare enemies / The bayonet tongue in this undefended prayerpiece..." (*Poems* 103). Thomas finds in Hardy, Yeats, and Houseman the supreme models of disinterested poetic strength in contrast to the innovative poets, Donne, Auden, and Eliot. He brings out the evolution of his active role born of labours which is, in a sense, a continual process of rejuvenation and regeneration. Thomas's poetic munificence calls the War poets "friend by enemy" and persuades them to be frank and objective "to others than you." Displacing Auden's "truth in the air," the War poets "rasped at last" that "my whole heart under your hammer." Thomas recasts:

With unforgettably smiling act,
Quickness of hand in the velvet glove
And my whole heart under your hammer,
Were once such a creature, so gay and frank
A desireless familiar
I never thought to utter or think
While you displaced a truth in the air.(138)

In *Another Time*, Auden has a scarce whit doubt of immortality as he starts writing poems of inner reality emulating the models of Edward Lear, Rimbaud, Pascal, and Herman Melville, "unluckily for a death ... waiting with phoenix under ... the pyre yet to be lighted of my sins and days" (Thomas 141). In *New Year Letter*, he is of intersecting "the positive and negative ways through time":

Our life and death are with our neighbour
And love illuminates again
The city and the lion's den
The world's great rage, the travel of young men. (*New Year Letter* 75)

As MacNeice says in the poem "Whit Monday," the readers should not lean too much on Auden's statement which may have been intended to comfort the far away War poets. "But the Happy Future is a thing of the past and the street / Echoes to nothing but their dawdling feet" (*MCP* 223). Auden's influence and appeal was on the decline with the rising popularity of Thomas in the warring world. Fuller, Rook, and Rhys communed with Thomas whereas Prince was dilemmatic. "The death bidding two lie lonely". Thomas explains:

My holy lucky body
Under the cloud against love is caught and held and kissed
In the mill of the midst
Of the descending day, the dark our folly.... (*Poems* 141)

Auden's poems of the middle phase show that he denied himself even this consoling belief in the eternity of his poetry even though he wished he could hold on to it as an escape from immediate misery. All the war poets excepting Prince having become the followers of Thomas's poetic ideal blessed Thomas of his immortality. In the poem "Unluckily for a Death," Thomas evaluates Auden's anxiety:

I see the unfired phoenix, herald
And heaven crier, arrow now of aspiring
And the renouncing of islands.
All love but for the full assemblage in flower
Of the living flesh is monstrous or immortal,
And the grave its daughters. (*Poems*)

He images the divided Prince between "shades" of spirit and "sensual" as "the wintry nunnery of the order of lust," "the tigron in tears ... in the androgynous dark," "the she mules bear their minotaurs ... the duck-billed platypus broody in a milk of birds," and "the wanting nun saint carved in a garb ... of shades, symbol of desire beyond my hours ... and guilts" (*Poems*).

In *For the Time Being*, Auden is "afraid of pain but more afraid of silence," "this Void":

I mean that although there's a person we know all about
Still bearing our name and loving himself as before,
That person has become a fiction; our true existence
Is decided by no one and has no importance to love. (*Collected Poems* 273)

And in "The Sea and the Mirror," he expresses his "evaporating sigh" of "what we shall become":

Never hope to say farewell,
For our lethargy is such
Heaven's kindness cannot touch us
Nor earth's frankly brutal drum.... (*ACP* 341)

Auden accepted his fate and remained patient as he was influenced by the Anglican layman, Charles Williams's idea as found in *The Descent of the Dove: A Short History of the Holy Spirit in the Church*, that freedom is synonymous with faith in more suffering and also by the philosophy of Kierkegaard that a convincing solution to the problem of suffering is "to be relieved of suffering in the sense is voluntarily to accept suffering in another" (5). The Apocalyptic poet Norman MacCaig reports in *Far Cry!* that Auden in the poems of the forties felt convinced of the necessity and support of religion to be blessed "with immortality at my side like Christ the sky."

Yet Thomas is certainly right when he says that his searching mind felt keenly the need of some kind of human recourse that would explain and ease the burden of suffering and found it in the poetic energy of Houseman. Commenting on his relentless search for man-centric words opposing the God-centric Word, he says:

The hunchback in the park
A solitary mister
Propped between trees and water
From the opening of the garden lock
That lets the trees and water enter
Until the Sunday sombre bell at dark....(129)

Thomas who recognizes, to use MacNeice's words, the "pragmatic" attitude of Christianity as a source of solace and sustenance, "the food ships," "corvettes" (222) to the afflicted and the affected evaluates the poet's task in a practical manner. His impersonal poetic functioning as revealed in his poems, *18 Poems*, *25 Poems*, *The Map of Love*, and *Deaths and Entrances* has been invariably found consoling and comforting to the fear-stricken, and alleviating and assuring to the doubtful fellow-beings and artists:

Eating bread from a newspaper
Drinking water from the chained cup
That the children filled with gravel
In the fountain basin where I sailed my ship
Slept at night in a dog kennel
But nobody chained him up. (*Poems*)

4. FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

The cluster of *18 Poems*, *25 Poems*, and *The Map of Love* thus gives a simultaneous impression of distance and nearness, of fictional illusoriness and intensity of immediate experience and acquires symbolic richness. The poems in *Deaths and Entrances*, too, are fused into the cluster, and this awful drama inspires in the readers tenderness, pity and terror. Thomas renders:

Round her trailed wrist fresh water weaves,
With moving fish and rounded stones
Up and down the greater waves
A separate river breathes and runs.... (*Poems*)

His insistence on sensation as the most valid mode and stuff of knowledge links him to the empirical tradition of Hardy, Yeats, and Houseman, although he did not subscribe to the view that the poet's mind was passive receptacle of sensations. He sought to codify and systematize his sensations, while asserting his poetic strength that real is experiential:

With wild sea fillies and soaking bridles
With salty colts and gales in their limbs
All the horses of his haul of miracles
Gallop through the arched, green farms.... (*Poems*)

MacNeice felicitates Thomas for his moral disinterestedness and for his effective functioning with poetic power for a harmonious existence impervious to destabilizing and demoralizing environs:

Never to fight unless from a pure motive
And for a clear end was his unwritten rule
Who had been in books and visions to a progressive school

And dreamt of barricades, being observant
Knew that that was not the way things are:
This man would never make a soldier or a servant. (224)

Thomas's functional role and life-oriented commitment as a poet stands as a contrast to Auden's "ascetic profile," "furtive footsore envy," "calm" and "lethal" standing. MacNeice, commenting on the "neutrality" of Auden and Thomas, remarks:

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

The poet Thomas who consoles and sustains the defeated, depressed poets of the thirties and the ignorant War poets with wisdom of "the leaning scene" and "the actions' end" stands as an evident proof of his moral disinterestedness, his "neutrality." The readers hear Thomas's voice changing in a quick shift into Houseman's:

Wake not for the world-heard thunder,
Nor the chimes that earthquakes toil;
Stars may plot in heaven with planet,
Lightning rive the rock of granite,
Tempest tread the oakwood under,
Fear not you for flesh or soul;
Marching, fighting, victory past,
Stretch your limbs in peace at last. (84)

Describing "the relation of the poetic strength to the poetic influence," Harold Bloom writes that "poetic strength comes only from a triumphant wrestling the greatest of the dead and from an even more triumphant solipsism"(218).

The system of salvation that Thomas offers in his poetry is the elaboration of his aesthetic ideal into a way of life. Thomas "refusing to fall in love with God ... gave himself to the love of created things ... accepting only what he could see" and created his own poetic culture, "a river full of the shadows of swallows' wings" (MCP 209). MacNeice, commenting on Thomas's poetic energy as "an ideal surely which ... here if anywhere is feasible," elaborates:

Thinking, each of them, the worst is over
And we do not want any more to be prominent or rich,
Only to be ourselves to be unmolested
And make ends meet.... (202)

The implication is that man possesses an inherent power by which he can conquer his self-regarding instinct and attain to the heights of selflessness. This selflessness, however, is only a form of self-expansion according to Houseman:

The nettle nods, the wind blows over,
The man, he does not move,
The lover of the grave, the lover
That hanged himself for love (AEH)

Thomas's *Deaths and Entrances* is really a restatement of Houseman's romantic self-sufficiency.

5. CONCLUSION

Thomas's poetry, thus, shows how he invariably evokes the ruling energy of the three "strong poets," Hardy, Yeats, and Houseman to express a significant mood or thought. In *Deaths and Entrances*, Thomas, as it were, lets them speak for him "on matters of birth and death" committally. He relays the truth:

Then good-bye to the fishermanned
Boat with its anchor free and fast
As a bird hooking over the sea,
High and dry by the top of the mast.... (34)

In the last poem *In the Country Sleep*, Thomas identifies his symbols of the archetypal, "Ancient Mind" (*Hardy* 102), Hardy, Yeats, and Houseman with William Blake and sums up "matters of birth and death" in the most objective, impersonal and committed manner. Whereas Auden in *The Age of Anxiety* lets the ancestors, the "ancient rote-restricted ways" (168) of de la Mare, Eliot and Rilke sum up "matters of birth and death, non-committally" because in them he discovers the meaning of his life, of his deepest aspirations, convictions and speculations. Thomas comments:

Land, land, land, nothing remains
Of the pacing, famous sea but its speech,
And into its talkative seven tombs
The anchor dives through the floors of a church. (39)

For him poetic practice is integrated with the practice of living. In the last poem *In Country Sleep*, he surveys the map of his poetry, his ruling energy and poetic power, and his functioning past and present while forgetting everything about the future and the immortality of his poetry:

Good-bye, good luck, struck the sun and the moon,
To the fisherman lost on the land.
He stands alone in the door of his home,
With his long-legged heart in his hand.(*Poems*)

The voice of moral disinterestedness, the "magnanimity of light" (*YCP*) as implicit in the poetry of Hardy, Yeats, and Houseman, while "haunting us, daunting us, taunting us ... when life beats are low ... other and graver things," has been guiding Thomas to guard his ways and to "hold we to braver things ... wait we, in trust, what Time's fullness shall show" (*HCP* 78) "for self-smitings kill self-joys" (102). As he has been receptive and active to "whatever flames upon the night ... man's own resinous heart has fed" (*YCP* 181), he "hurried through the smooth and rough ... and through the fertile and waste ... protecting ... with human love" (180). His "ecstatic waters laugh because ... their cries are sweet and strange"(283), because "a company of friends, a conscience set at ease" that "made us pine the more" from the dangers of "abstract joy ... the half-read wisdom of daemonic images" (174). Poetry has been his mainstay, his sustaining and consoling power, "lovers' ills are all to buy" (*AEH* 90) as he hearkened to "the lover's say ... and happy is the lover" (93). Hardy explains that life-centric ruling energy of the poet paves the way for permanence:

-Rain came down drenchingly; but we unblenchingly
Trudged on beside them through mirk and through mire,
They stepping steadily—only too readily!-
Scarce as if stepping brought parting-time nigher. (77)

In *18 Poems* Thomas as an "ephebe" (Bloom 220) has "imparted ... divinity ... to the precursor" Hardy, "my hero bares my side and sees his heart ... tread, like a naked Venus" (*Poems* 97) and also anticipated his immortality which is assured in *Deaths and Entrances*. However, his "movement" is neither "away from" the precursor nor "a

primary revision that imputes error to the father” (Bloom), but continuously reincarnates Hardy as his animating “spark” as and when he incarnates Yeats and Houseman, the precursors of his subsequent poems, *25 Poems*, *The Map of Love*, and *Deaths and Entrances*. What makes Thomas continuously energetic and strong as a poet, “a bird’s sleepy cry ... among the deepening shades” (*YCP* 168), “the sound of the rain or sound ... of every wind that blows”(169), “a breath ... of birth and death,” (289) “Hound Voice ... amid the encircling hounds” and “Hound Voices” (290), evolves itself as “the purposed Life ... serene, sagacious, free” outshining “the norm of every royal-reckoned attribute” (*HCP* 75), “the monuments of its own magnificence,” repudiating the “bodily form” of “monuments of unaging intellect” and “the artifice of eternity”(163), and advances as “the natural parallel” (Thomas 73), “the apotheosis of strength” (Bloom), the resolute ruling energy and poetic power, “if the heats of hate and lust ... in the house of flesh are strong ... let me mind the house of dust ... where my sojourn shall be long” (*AEH* 88).

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

Competing Interests: The author declares that there are no conflicts of interests regarding the publication of this paper.

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Thomas’s functional role and life-oriented commitment as poet of *Deaths and Entrances* consoling and sustaining the depressed poets of the thirties and the ignorant War poets of the forties stands as an evident proof of his ruling energy, his moral disinterestedness.

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