

THE PROSE OF VERNON WATKINS

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an edition of the prose of Vernon Watkins (Welsh poet, 1906-1967). It includes nearly all of Watkins' published prose: essays, book reviews, notes on poems, broadcast scripts, answers to questionnaires, and introductions. Several unpublished pieces, taken from manuscripts, are also included. An introduction shows that Watkins' prose was directly related to, and influential upon, his poetry, and summarizes his poetic theory and its importance for the modern reader. A biographical sketch of Watkins, based on research in Wales, is provided, as are explanatory and critical notes on each individual piece of prose.

The methods of investigation/used to complete this thesis were standard bibliographical procedures, personal research in Wales (mainly interviewing friends of Watkins), and critical analysis based, whenever possible, on Watkins' own comments.

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## INTRODUCTION

It was one of Vernon Watkins' quaint convictions that he "never wrote prose." The purpose of this edition is to show that he did, and that his prose is useful to the reader of his poetry in several ways. Scattered throughout the prose are certain explicitly stated assumptions and conclusions about the nature, purpose, and source of poetry. These assumptions are the foundation on which his work was built; so exactly did he write as he believed that the prose can be used as an aid toward understanding the poetry, and the poetry can be seen as illustrating the principles contained in the prose.

This edition contains nearly all of Watkins' published prose:<sup>1</sup> essays, reviews, broadcasts, letters to newspapers, introductions to books, and comments on his own poems. Seven unpublished pieces are added, leaving uncollected, so far as is known, only fragments and personal letters. Typographical errors have been corrected without notification, and in the case of some manuscripts, a choice of best reading has been made without textual variants being noted.

The miscellaneous pieces that make up this collection were written, for the most part, to order, or for an occasion. Watkins had a highly developed sense of occasion; again and again in the prose, a situation, or a challenge from another author, enabled

<sup>1</sup>The exceptions are three items still in print, which are listed in the bibliography, p.<sup>239</sup>below.

him to formulate his thoughts on a particular subject. However, these thoughts may have been searching for an outlet for some time, and one should not conclude from its form that this prose is merely "occasional." Though he never developed a system, metaphysical or aesthetic, Watkins' scattered statements about poetry are coherent, and from them one can piece together his poetic theory. The importance of his prose for the general reader lies in this theory, in which he defends a concept of inspiration which is as unpopular today as it was anciently revered.

Vernon Watkins believed in the imagination, which was for him the divine spark in every man, raised to a creative force in some by "an inner experience which changed the man."<sup>1</sup> He believed in direct divine inspiration, that the content, and often the form, of a poem is given: "I believe in the gifts of instant and unalterable truth which a poet cannot predict."<sup>2</sup> His faith in the imagination originated, along with his religious beliefs and several of the most important metaphors of his poetry,<sup>3</sup> in one shattering, transcendent event in his youth. Though he rarely referred, save in metaphor, to his "conversion," his initial mystical experience, there are indirect references in his prose: "I do not know when my love of poetry was born, but I can remember when it changed, and changed fundamentally. Since that

<sup>1</sup>"The Second Pressure in Poetry," p.160 below.

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit., 161.

<sup>3</sup>For example, images of rebirth, the end of time, darkness in the midst of light, and of "seeing the world in a grain of sand."



change it is true to say that only that poetry seems to me authentic in which the passing of time is dominated by the vision. A poem is shaped by belief. In all good poetry the transience of human life becomes an illusion."<sup>1</sup> Five years after writing this passage, Watkins, using as symbol for himself and for the living imagination the figure of the Welsh poet Taliesin, wrote "Taliesin and the Spring of Vision," which includes these lines:

Earth's shadow hung. Taliesin said: "The penumbra of history  
is terrible.  
Life breaks, changes, scatters. There is no sheet-anchor.  
Time reigns; yet the kingdom of love is every moment,  
Whose citizens do not age in each other's eyes.  
In a time of darkness the pattern of life is restored  
By men who make all transience seem an illusion  
Through inward acts, acts corresponding to music.  
Their works of love leave words that so not end in the heart."<sup>2</sup>

The prose passage quoted above aids in the understanding of this poem. The "men who make all transience seem an illusion" are poets, whose works are "inward acts" because they rely on the imagination rather than on external stimulæ. Their acts correspond to music because (as he says in "Context") "Poetry is closer to music than to prose." The vision spoken of in the prose quotation is both the "gift of instant and unalterable truth" and the mystical vision described later in the poem as "the soul's rebirth."

Watkins was directly in the tradition of English mystical poetry, his poetic ancestors being Vaughan, Blake, and Yeats.

<sup>1</sup>"The Poet's Voice," p. 20 below.

<sup>2</sup>From Cypress and Acacia (London, 1959), 20-21.

It is characteristic of mystical poets to emphasize the imagination over any rational or psychological explanation of creativity, and to stress the religious, but not necessarily theological, duties of art. In "The Healing of the Leper," these concepts, frequent in Watkins' prose, are expressed in terms of that dislocation of the senses so characteristic of the mystical experience:

O, have you seen the leper healed,  
 And fixed your eyes upon his look?  
 There is the book of God revealed,  
 And God has made no other book.

Plotinus, preaching on heaven's floor,  
 Could not give praise like that loud cry  
 Bursting the bondage of death's door;  
 For we die once; indeed we die.

What Sandro Botticelli found  
 Rose from the river where we bathe;  
 Music the air, the stream, the ground;<sup>1</sup>  
 Music the dove, the rock, the faith...

Since its origin in the Greek Muse, the concept of poetic inspiration has been defended, assumed or attacked by nearly every poet and critic, much according to the philosophical and religious fashions of the day. Blake alone defended it in his time, and Watkins, one of its few supporters today, owed much to Blake's example. Both poets felt the imagination to be the divine in man, and that all men are, theoretically, capable of inspiration; that imaginative acts are imperishable, and will eventually lead to the establishment of a New Jerusalem; that the inspired man is in a state beyond that of the ordinary man, and need not wait for death to experience Eden; that art is

<sup>1</sup>"The Poet's Voice," p.26 below.

non-competitive; that deductive and inductive reasoning are equally false; that sense impressions, history, and the contemporary scene are material for the imagination, and have their meaning in the artist's perception of them; that there could never be a natural religion; that the imagination conquers time; and that the artist must oppose society when art is at stake. Such gnomic statements as the following remind one of Blake:

The epic depends upon exactness of detail: the larger the theme, the more minute its organization.

Defects of the imagination are always reflected in style.

Lyric poetry at its best is the physical body of what the imagination recognizes as truth.<sup>1</sup>

Watkins' emphasis on tradition lends a practical dimension to his theory of inspiration. Reminding young poets that inspiration in itself does not write poetry, he would urge them to learn their trade from the great poets of the past: "A true style cannot be learnt from contemporaries."<sup>2</sup> He felt that imitation of living poets was merely fashionable, that only that poetry which had survived fashion was suitable for a model. His oft-repeated statement "Write for the dead" (meaning that poetry ought to be recognizable as such by its forerunners) reminds us of his own use of traditional elements: natural imagery, mythological characters and symbols, traditional forms and phrases, and the eternal theme of life and death. This traditional bias

<sup>1</sup>"Poets on Poetry," p.103below.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

is typical of many mystics and mystical poets, who express their beliefs, however unorthodox, in the context of a particular religion or poetic tradition.

Obeying his own advice, Watkins never ceased to learn from his poetic ancestors; his style was still evolving when he died. He learned, too, from his own writing experience; in fact, writing prose seems to have stimulated him poetically. Working in a foreign medium allowed him to stand apart from poetry for a while, and getting back to his real work was invigorating. Prose passages suggested lines and phrases in poems. In addition to the Taliesin example quoted above, he echoed "The Poet's Voice" in the poem "Woodpecker and Lyre-Bird";<sup>1</sup> "Poets on Poetry" is echoed in the poem "Affinities"<sup>2</sup> and in several poems in Fidelities;<sup>3</sup> and the articles on Dylan Thomas are prophetic of the poems on Thomas.

The ordering of Watkins' thoughts in the starkness and immediacy of prose assisted in the development of his poetry from the florid, symbol-laden Romantic style to the spare, elegiac style he called Metaphysical. During the earliest period of his work, prior to 1937, he wrote very little prose, and read little beyond that of Yeats, Kierkegaard and a few mystics. The poetry of this period is often vague, inorganic or imitative; though very beautiful, the poems bear little relationship to the world

<sup>1</sup>"Written to an Instrument," p. 50 below.

<sup>2</sup>Affinities (London, 1963), 19.

<sup>3</sup>Fidelities (London, 1968), 19-22, 55-57, 71-72, 102-103.

outside their own carefully measured cadences. The later poems are simpler, more direct, and more assertive. The difference was due mainly to Watkins' increasing experience, his growth in Christian faith and grace, and the intense struggle against the forces that threatened the stability of his mind, but the writing of prose helped by holding at bay his tendency toward what one critic has called "scatterbrained diffuseness." He found it necessary to make statements in prose, and he began making statements in poetry.

But he never overcame his reluctance to make statements that could be construed as attempts at a system. Partially for this reason, and partially because he hated abstract thinking in art and literature, his criticism belongs to no school. He was only vaguely aware of the combats of critical theory in this century and had little patience for the theories of the past; though he was aware of the archetypal theory and used archetypal figures in numerous poems, he was not a follower of Jung, Bodkin or Frye. Those beliefs he held about the value and proper methods of criticism echoed his general beliefs about art. As one would expect, he felt that poets make the best critics; in fact, he felt that practical explication should be done only by the poet: "Dante went in for prose analysis in the Vita Nuova, so it mustn't be despised, but only the poet can do it satisfactorily, and if he doesn't want to, he shouldn't."<sup>1</sup>

The pseudo-scientific vocabulary of much modern criticism

1966.<sup>1</sup>Vernon Watkins in a letter to the present writer, November

was anathema to Watkins, for it seemed to him an attempt to drag poetry down into the world of sense. He was opposed to any psychological gambit which relegated poetry to the level of neurosis, but despised anyone who sought "normality." If his criticism could be described by any one word, "impressionistic" would be closest, but only if it is used to mean simply that the critic records his own emotions and reactions to a work of art rather than attempting to apply rules to it or to deduce standards from it. He did occasionally proceed from an "impressionistic" stand to draw conclusions relevant to his own beliefs, but this occurred only where he recognized an influence on his own work.

The "impressionistic" quality of his criticism is a measure of his attitude rather than the result of ignorance. His knowledge of the periods, movements and individual authors of English literature was immense. In addition to translating from French, German, Spanish, Italian and Magyar, he studied the traditions within these literatures and kept aware of contemporaries by reading journals as well as by personally knowing many of the poets involved. When discussing his favorite authors, English or Continental, he always referred to the historical, philosophical and theological influences upon them. He was widely interested in all the arts, from painting to lacework. Though he professed to have little use for scholarship, errors of dating and quotation never escaped him, and he had the scholar's memory for manuscript versions, misprints and other textual matters. This scholarly cast of mind was a function of his incontestable

honesty in dealing with any matter of literature or art. For Vernon Watkins, being true to himself, to others, and to art were one and the same.

## A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF VERNON WATKINS

Vernon Phillips Watkins was born June 27, 1906, in Maesteg, a small town in southeast Wales. Both his father, the local Lloyds Bank manager, and his mother, the daughter of a gentleman farmer, were Welsh-speaking, but he was not taught modern Welsh as a boy. His father, though an intelligent man, not only missed this educational opportunity but also did the boy actual harm by forcing him to depend wholly on his mother.

Watkins' education began in Swansea at Mirador School and Swansea Grammar, both of which Dylan Thomas, later his friend, would also attend. He then attended Tyttenhanger Lodge, Repton, and one year at Cambridge. Family financial difficulties and disappointments at Cambridge (none academic) led to his return to Swansea, where he became a clerk in Lloyds. He was then eighteen. Though there could have been no one less suited for this job, he kept it forty-one years.

In his early twenties, suffering from nervousness, sexual difficulties, and a severe identity problem, he experienced a temporary loss of contact with "reality." But during his madness he began the long-avoided struggle with God that is the mystic's first step toward spiritual rebirth; and from then till the day of his death, love of God was foremost in his life. He emerged, not whole, but determined to become whole, and convinced that he was a true poet, that he had been born to write poetry.



At the age of six, Watkins had decided to become a poet, and he began writing then. But the experience that made him a poet also turned him against publication; it was not till 1937 that Dylan Thomas persuaded him to begin journal publication, and it was not till 1941 that his first book, Ballad of the Mari Lwyd, was issued by Faber and Faber. His success frightened him a little; though he began new poems nearly every week of his thirty-year publishing career, the total of poems from both journals and collections is only 339.

The release of Mari coincided with the mobilization of its author. Six years in the R. A. F. changed Watkins. He became aware of his superb fitness and mental superiority, thereby gaining a quiet confidence which led to his discovery of, not girls but one girl. Gwen Davies, seventeen to his thirty-six, was in many ways his opposite, vivacious where he was solemn, practical where he was clumsy, and adaptable where he was stern. He did not court her, he did not promise happiness; he simply announced that they were to be married. Her many, valid, and strongly expressed objections to this situation had no effect on his obstinacy, and she realized that whatever one felt about him, one could not ignore him. But he knew that he had chosen well, knew, somehow, that she would be as necessary to his work as to his life. His stubborn tactics were successful: they were married in London, October 2, 1944.

In January of 1946, though awaiting Intelligence duties in Germany, Watkins received a compassionate discharge. Lloyds welcomed him back, and he moved, with his wife and baby, to the Uplands in Swansea.

The following twenty years saw a gradual increase in Watkins' popularity as a poet, reader and lecturer, his slow rise marked by occasional conspicuous honors. He was made a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1951, and twice received, in 1952 and 1956, the £ 200 Travelling Scholarship of the Society of Authors. He also received the first Guinness Prize, the Levinson Prize of Poetry Chicago, the Quarterly Review of Literature Prize, and two Fulbrights. But in Watkins' eyes these honors were unimportant, though the money involved was always necessary. He cared only for the writing of poetry, ensuring the security of his growing family, and making new friends.

In 1966 Watkins retired from Lloyds. He was saved from the necessity of supporting himself and six others on a tiny pension, however, by University College, Swansea, which gave him a D. Litt. and created for him the post of Gulbenkian Fellow in Poetry. Amazed as he was at this metamorphosis from bank clerk to professor, Watkins began his duties with great enthusiasm--which gradually turned to distress as he realized that his students did not share it. More congenial to his concept of poetry and the poet's mission was the next position offered him, that of Visiting Professor at the University of Washington, where he had previously taught for one term. Though he was not well and did not want to leave Wales, he accepted the offer for financial reasons.

Watkins' shy, gentle nature masked a stubbornness that cared nothing for fate or the opinions of others. He had never allowed his duties, whether occupational, familial, or military, interfere with the writing of poetry, nor did he ever let practical matters influence his imagination. Similarly, his very active life was

symbolic to him of fitness and youth, and he refused to admit that illness and age could change him. Furthermore, all his competitive tendencies had been forced into sports; and when friends his age refused to play tennis or squash, he would seek younger opponents. When he arrived in Seattle, he accepted several offers to play tennis as casually as he did invitations to tea.

Watkins died October 8, 1967 on the university tennis court, after playing for nearly four hours. October was his favorite month, tennis his favorite sport, Sunday afternoon his favorite time of the week; he was exhilarated and content. He did not fear death: if there was a moment for him to realize that his heart had stopped, he welcomed death. There is no doubt he died happy.

Review of David Jones' In Parenthesis  
Wales, 5 (Summer, 1938), 184

This slight review, Watkins' first published prose, accurately indicates his reading interests at the time: Gerard Manley Hopkins, Wilfred Owen, and David Jones. Typically, he does not relate this work to its original context, the first World War, nor to the coming war, but to an eternal source of art. It was of equal irrelevance to him that Jones carried a rifle, that Owen was killed carrying one, and that he would soon be shouldering one himself.

By contributing frequently to Wales early in his career, Watkins deliberately emphasized his Welshness. Even here he chooses to compare an Anglo-Welsh author (David Jones, of English and Welsh parentage) with two others who have frequently been called Anglo-Welsh (Hopkins was of Welsh ancestry, lived in Wales, and wrote some Cymric; Owen was of Welsh ancestry).

## THE PROSE OF VERNON WATKINS

1938

A Review of In Parenthesis by David Jones

David Jones has contrived a magnetism of all wars to one focal point. It is a prose tempered in the same fire where Gerard Manley Hopkins forged his, as though the centre of the Earth had trained its edge and sudden shining. Yet none with such a weapon could have killed a man. Always though in another's armour Launcelot is recognized; always men look back to some primary bias of strength and the universe of the artist is suspect. How astonishing are the likenesses to Owen: on page 77 we find:

"Down on the right they were at it intermittently, and far away north, if you listened carefully, was always the dull toll of The Salient--troubling--like somebody else's war."

and in Owen's Exposure:

"Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,  
Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war."

C.F. also page 110 and Owen's Spring Offensive.

In Parenthesis is a unique writing--such as Wilfred Owen might have written had he survived the war.

Replies to the Wales Questionnaire  
Wales, VI, 2 (Autumn 1946), 23-24

This questionnaire was one of several attempts by Wales magazine to define "Anglo-Welsh." Most of the writers who replied, including Watkins, H. Idris Bell, David Jones, Saunders Lewis, and R. S. Thomas, did not feel that the term could be used to indicate their respective works. Here Watkins calls himself an English poet because he wrote mainly in English; later he would call himself a Welsh poet because he was born in Wales of Welsh parents.

While he did not write in Welsh, as he admits here, critics have been wrong in assuming that he knew no Welsh. In his youth he studied medieval Cymric and its literature with his father, a translator of some accomplishment, and was acquainted with the works of the major Welsh poets. He remained sufficiently interested in the language to provide a glossary for the Welsh words used by David Jones in his "Tutelar of the Place."<sup>1</sup>

The remark about Plato was a favorite saying of his, around which he wrote a little poem:

The Stayers

Others migrate to heaven from doubt,  
 But Earth needs heroes for her own.  
 I'd not, like Plato, keep them out,  
 But leave them till the rest have flown.<sup>2</sup>

"Haigha" is a character in Through the Looking-Glass.

<sup>1</sup>Originally published in Poetry Chicago, XCVII, 4 (January 1961), 209.

<sup>2</sup>From a manuscript in my possession. Twenty versions later, this poem became the one printed on p. 61 of Fidelities.

1946

Replies to the Wales Questionnaire

1. Do you consider yourself an Anglo-Welsh writer?

No. I am a Welshman, and an English poet. Wales is my native country, and English the native language of my imagination. I would be Anglo-Welsh only if I could write also in Welsh. I wish I could; but even then, English being the first language I learnt would remain my first language as a poet.

2. For whom do you write?

Everybody; and, more particularly, for a succession of natures stretching as far back and as far into the Future as possible for whom the values of the imagination are at once first and unchanging. I am concerned chiefly with paradoxical truths, and my poems are addressed to those who underestimate the subtlety of life and death.

3. What is your opinion of the relationship between Literature and Society?

The impact of literature on society may not be felt for several generations, but ultimately it is bound to be felt. In an ideal republic everyone would be a poet, and Plato would be left outside until he became one. But in the world as it is we must be satisfied if a country honours but does not flatter its artists. An artist's reward is his work, and a country's reward is the relationship of that work to the world. The highest good that can come from art is found always in the individual, who receives both rewards.

4. Should "Anglo-Welsh Literature" express a Welsh attitude to

life and affairs, or should it merely be a literature about Welsh things?

The best Anglo-Welsh literature will always be that which abhors Anglo-Welsh limitations. Wales is incomparable. Then why compare it? And will a Welsh attitude to life ever be more serious than Haigha's Anglo-Saxon attitudes?

5. Do you believe that a sense of Welsh nationhood is more consistent with one particular attitude to life and affairs than any other?

Yes. I think Wales should be proud of being the humblest country in the world.



"The Poet's Voice" (sixth in a series of that title)  
Broadcast 25 September 1947 from Cardiff on the Welsh Home Service

Parts of Watkins' rehearsal script of this talk<sup>1</sup> are crossed out, presumably because the original was too long for the fifteen minutes allowed it, but the entire text is given here.

As a bewildered and extremely unimportant member of the Royal Air Force, Watkins alternated between remarkable incompetence and surprising success. He received no commission because he failed the oral examination ("They asked me about buttons, how far the buttons were from the lapel...very funny."), but he placed first in his training as a military policeman. Though totally inept at polishing boots, making beds and drill (he was once bodily removed by a very superior officer from an important parade), he was rapidly promoted. Temporary duties as a sentry were incomprehensible to him, so he adopted his own criterion for admittance to the base: a bar of chocolate.

It is strange that he tries to give the impression that no one knew he was a poet. According to Gwen Watkins and Neville Masterman, both of whom spent their military careers with Watkins, the base at Bletchley was a home for misplaced intellectuals who, between bombings, would entertain each other with their respective talents. Watkins gave poetry readings and lectures on Yeats. For commentary on one such occasion, see the introduction to Philip Larkin's The North Ship.

All the poems in this talk are from The Lady with the Unicorn.

<sup>1</sup>The original of this script, with Watkins' corrections and signature, is in my possession.

1947

## The Poet's Voice

As this talk is about my own poetry I ought to begin by saying what my attitude to poetry is. I find this difficult because, although I have been writing poetry for more than thirty years, I am aware that my poetry is in an early stage of its growth. Yet I am sure that it will not change in certain essentials.

I cannot remember when my love of poetry was born but I can remember when it changed, and changed fundamentally. Since that change it is true to say that only that poetry seems to me authentic in which the passing of time is dominated by the vision. I now feel that a poem is shaped by belief. In all good poetry the transience of human life becomes an illusion. Those who read or hear a poem should remember that a good poem has two audiences; it is addressed to the living and the dead at the same time. If a poet dismisses the living he becomes morbid; if he dismisses the dead he ceases to be a prophet.

During the war I found myself in an environment and in a role which I had never expected. I was an R. A. F. policeman, and guarding a camp where I was always losing my way, since I invariably confused one building with another. In circumstances such as these there seemed to be no place for my poetry, nor, indeed, for me; but at night when I stood at the gate examining passes I had a critic's authority, for my task was to understand in a moment all that was set before me. The passes were enigmatic, but at times the faces and photographs under lamplight were disturbing.

I never spoke about my poetry, but I did write a little poem,  
called

## CROWDS

Why should the living need my oil?  
I see them, and their eyes are blest.  
No. For those others I must toil.  
I toil to set the dead at rest.

Yet when I watch in solemn tides  
The drifting crowds, each life a ghost,  
I mourn them, for their truth abides;  
Nor is one loved, till he is lost.

It does not matter to me how long a poem takes to write. The work of poetry proceeds from a single moment, and the process is so uncertain that it may take a few hours or many years to finish, but the final poem should correspond as closely as possible to the original vision or idea. It may, however, be enriched by new moments in the course of composition, or a new poem may grow out of an old one after a lapse of time.

Last year my sister, who was in Greece, came to Arakhova, a village below Parnassus, opposite Delphi, and saw the place where in 1929 my friend David Cochrane fell to his death. My recollection returned sharply, and I wrote a new poem which I called ARAKHOVA AND THE DAEMON. I have used the Greek word Daemon, meaning the soul of the dead.

She, on the path where he had gone,  
Even now assembles rock. To touch  
The pulse of water that runs on  
Is to have lost and found so much.

Was it not there that he caught hold,  
Where Delphi hears the hidden spring?  
And there Prometheus' fire like gold  
Under the edge of that great wing

Suddenly caught his nineteen years  
As thundering, whirling waters go,  
Into whose stream the mind's eye stares  
Where the light gathers all we know.

Light on Parnassus: there, keen-brained,  
 He struck it from the flint he held,  
 And halfway up the rock attained  
 A sky no other man beheld,

Wrought of old cities like a skein  
 Gathered from gate and buried wall,  
 Whirling about that single vein.  
 What mountain eagle watched him fall?

His crooked climbing, out of joint,  
 Possessed the Sibyl in her cell;  
 And still she looks to Cocrane's Point  
 Silent, as though her brother fell.

There in Arakhova men say  
 He climbed by moonlight; others guess  
 That the sun dazzled him. He lay  
 Long near a precipice. Pages press

Like like a flower. A myth is laid  
 Mute, where these guardian trees surround  
 The chiselled stone a workman made.  
 Under that rock his bones were found;

And seventeen years are gone, where now  
 Light, like a new-found blossom, breaks.  
 I ponder this, much marvelling how  
 His daemon haunts the path she takes

Who never saw him. Yet he struck  
 Fire from the rock with all he said.  
 His daemon so transforms that rock  
 That the rough world, not he, is dead.

I would give a great many poems that are found in most anthologies for the two which Donne wrote in his deathbed; and that is because I am a Christian poet and believe that a poet should not offer mankind less than the whole truth of his integrity. Many of my poems spring from a paradox, from a truth which materialism could never have dreamed possible. I think of a very old woman who had made lace all her life and who, living in great poverty, at last finished a lace altar-cloth for her church, but refused to accept any money for it. She is the character behind the poem I shall now read, which is called

## LACE-MAKER

Lined, wrinkled face,  
 Fingers of Samothrace,  
 Making so secretly move  
 In a fragile pattern of lace  
 Your untranslatable love:

Dark, withdrawn from delight,  
 Under the water-bowl light  
 On a cushion spread in your room  
 Pricking the stretch of night  
 With secrets old as the womb:

Patient, you toil alone.  
 Eighty years are gone  
 Since first your fingers tossed  
 Those bobbins one by one  
 In a craft that is almost lost.

Flashing in failing skies,  
 Gay Kitty Fisher's Eyes,  
 As they call these Buckingham beads,  
 Restore that far sunrise  
 To your pensive widow's weeds;

And your shadowing, birdlike hand,  
 Migrated from a young land,  
 Brings, like a midnight lark,  
 Whiter than whitest sand,  
 Light running out of dark:

Fine sand, too quick to tread,  
 Crossed by the sea in your head  
 In a hundred thundering tides  
 Breaking in foam, the thread  
 White, unlost, like a bride's

Beautiful, gathered lace,  
 Foretelling the lover's pace,  
 That lover of foam, the hot  
 Sea, for one hour, one place,  
 One moment, caught in a knot.

No sooner come than gone:  
 So light, it is not weighed down  
 By any thought that will stay.  
 You have seen time's flood that would drown  
 Surpassed in butterflies' play,

Yet intricately surpassed;  
 For rather you chose to fast  
 Than sell that delicate stream

Of lace on the altar cast,  
A gift, for night to redeem:

Lace, fragile, fine,  
In a magic, a moving design,  
A silence, in which I see  
Through the sea-engendered vine  
A glory, not of the sea.

From that poem of a long life I pass to a poem of a short life, consecrated by the same timeless moment. Joy, for the poet especially, springs always from such a moment, from an understanding that life is a gift.

This is a poem called THE BUTTERFLIES.

High, lost in light, they pair,  
Butterflies blue, so fair,  
Blind in stopped flight,  
Twined on a thread,  
Then drop where light, effaced,  
Shuts, in the dread  
Secret of sepalled air,  
Their petals chaste.

Hid, meadow-masked from sight,  
Hushed near the pulse of light,  
They magnify  
With big round eye  
Antennae'd, that gold place  
From which the sky  
Seizes their still delight,  
Inventing space.

Suddenly they spring up,  
Blown from a butter-cup,  
Alight, elude,  
And reunite;  
They mingle their blue wings  
Dazzling the sight,  
Like a blue wind, then stop,  
Sit, and are kings.

That crooked life would seem  
Vain, did no falling stream  
Chime a strange year  
Time-changing here,  
And yew-tree with no sound,  
And murmuring weir,  
Catch on a weaver's beam  
The thread they wound

Past the farm wall, where grieves  
 An aspen, whose wild leaves  
 Toss, where roots brawl  
 On fosse and wall,  
 Gathering their green and white,  
 Strain, feign to fall,  
 And cast across the eaves  
 A changing light:

A dancing thread, how much  
 More fragile, hard to touch,  
 Brighter in flight,  
 More light than theirs  
 Or spiders' threads in air.  
 Fugitive players:  
 It was a pain to watch  
 A twine so fair

Flying, so quickly gone,  
 Stretching their dalliance on  
 From plot to plot,  
 Not to return,  
 Past hedge and flowering rose,  
 Falling in turn,  
 As though the hour had shone  
 For none but those.

The last poem I have chosen for this talk also celebrates the moment, this time the moment of faith, the moment which is decisive for life and death at the same time. The lofty thought of the Greek philosopher Plotinus seemed to me transcended by an image in a painting by Botticelli, by a face whose Christian faith expressed a willingness to die and live at the same time.

#### THE HEALING OF THE LEPER

O, have you seen the leper healed,  
 And fixed your eyes upon his look?  
 There is the book of God revealed,  
 And God has made no other book.

The withered hand which time interred  
 Grasps in a moment the unseen.  
 The word we had not heard, is heard.  
 What we are then, we had not been.

Plotinus, preaching on heaven's floor,  
 Could not give praise like that loud cry  
 Bursting the bondage of death's door;  
 For we die once; indeed we die.

What Sandro Botticelli found  
Rose from the river where we bathe;  
Music the air, the stream, the ground;  
Music the dove, the rock, the faith:

And all that music whirled upon  
The eyes' deep-sighted, burning rays,  
Where all the prayers of labours done  
Are resurrected into praise.

But look: his face is like a mask  
Surrounded by the beat of wings.  
Because he knows that ancient task  
His true transfiguration springs.

All fires the prophets' words contained  
Fly to those eyes, transfixed above.  
Their awful precept has remained:  
"Be nothing, first; and then, be love".



"The Translation of Poetry"  
The Gate, I, 3 (1947), 35-39

Watkins began translating poetry almost as early as he began writing it, while still a schoolboy. He learned French and German as a boy, and was able to practice these languages during Continental vacations. As he preferred to read poetry in its original language, he went on to study Italian (to read Dante), Spanish (to read Juan de la Cruz), and medieval Welsh (to read Taliesin). His attempts at modern Welsh and Homeric Greek were not very successful.

Among his translations are The North Sea<sup>1</sup> from Heine's Die Nordsee, The Salzburg Great Theatre of the World<sup>2</sup>, five cantos of Paradiso (which were read on the BBC), and many lyrics from Josef Attila, Baudelaire, Tristan Corbiere, Eichendorff, Fort, Gautier, Ricarda Huch, Francis Jammes, Erich Kästner, Morike, Rilke, Schiller, Verlaine, Valery, and van der Vogelweide.

<sup>1</sup>Vernon Watkins, The North Sea (New York: New Directions, 1951).

<sup>2</sup>Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Plays and Libretti (New York: Pantheon, 1963).

## The Translation of Poetry

"Savez-vous pourquoi Jérémie  
 A tant pleuré pendant sa vie?  
 C'est qu'en prophète il prévoyait  
 Qu'un jour Lefranc le traduirait."  
 ---Voltaire

"O thou whom Poesy abhors,  
 Whom prose has turned out of doors!  
 Heardst thou that groan? proceed no further  
 'Twas laurelled Martial roaring 'Murther!'"  
 ---Burns

(on Elphinstone's Translations of Martial's Epigrams)

The translation of poetry can be sharply divided into two schools which are complementary to each other, the poet's and the scholar's. I do not mean that there are no poets who are not scholars and no scholars who are not poets, but that one school is governed by the instinct of poetry, the creative instinct, while the other is governed by retrospective scholarship, the instinct of research. Both are, I think, necessary to each other, for the one is there to supply the lack of the other: if a poet departs from the text, a scholar will supply it; if a scholar's translation lacks the poetry of the original he must wait for a poet to make it apparent.

As regards the respective merits of the two methods I hold a biased view, being more attached to poetry than to scholarship. Yet I am certain that the best translations of poetry are made by poets. I do not even think that the scholar's method is the more industrious one, for the approach of scholarship appears to stop at the original poet's written text, but the translator who is a poet is concerned with the whole orbit of the poet's thought during the period of composition; the written text is the track of a

secret and more elaborate movement to which he alone, through an affinity of mind, has the key. I should say briefly that the scholar is likely to know the historical background of the poem, but that the intuitive and aural background is better understood by a poet. A poet, too, is more likely to know when the choice of a word, perhaps not the best word, is forced on the original poet by the exigencies of language. A poet, then, seeks the migration of the mysteries of language from one country to another, and he seeks an equivalent poem which will make use of every advantage offered by the new language. For the first condition of a translation by a poet is that it should still be a poem, and that it should read like an original poem. In this sense translation is a creative art like the art of poetry.

I am sure that what Shelley in his "Defence of Poetry" called "The curse of Babel" can be a blessing. Shelley wrote: "Hence the vanity of translation; it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower--and this is the burthen of the curse of Babel." This judgment is, I think, true only of translations in which the poetic faculty has been sacrificed.

The stubbornness of language in yielding its treasures must never be forgotten, though Shelley seems to have forgotten it in writing about translation; for surely the poet's task is not easy and requires all his patience and tenacity to be accomplished. There are as many pitfalls for the original poet as for the

translator, and a poet may well find obstacles in his own language which only patience and the force of character can overcome, for a clear articulation to emerge victorious over the forces of imprecision. In Shelley's own poetry one is not conscious of the same conflict with language one finds in Donne or Yeats, and his poetry would be stronger if it were there. In the same way a good translation is likely to be a victory over a great many possible bad translations.

In some translations of poetry the idiom of the original poet is retained, and this may be called the "imitative kind". In others the idiom is transfused in such a way that the idiom of the translating poet dominates the text. One does not read Pope's translation of Homer to read Homer, but to read Pope. If there is a strong affinity of idioms between poet and translator a masterpiece may result, and such masterpieces belong to the category of creative poetry. An example of such miraculous grafting of one poet's idiom upon another's is found in Marlowe's translation of Ovid's "Amores" where the verse, while still holding the force of the Latin, carries the full glory and music of Marlowe's English.

Translation, then, has not only a utilitarian value, that of introducing masterpieces to foreigners who do not know their language, but a creative and aesthetic value too, which would be valid if the original did not exist. It is also one of the most nourishing arts, and one of the most valuable for a poet to learn. For a poet needs, besides his inspiration, an art which belongs to time, and besides his prophet's vocation, the role of interpreter. Eustache Deschamps called Chaucer

"Grant translateur, noble Geoffroy Chaucier", and Villon, a century later, was able to use Chaucer's material in his own verse because both were translators, both Europeans.

A critic of our time has said that every great age of poetry is also a great age of translation. This is very likely to be true. The Elizabethan age was certainly both, and it seems no coincidence that the best German translations of Shakespeare came in the great era of German poetry, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, from Tieck and Schlegel. The recent renaissance of German poetry, too, was accompanied by Stefan George's fine translations from French, Italian, Spanish and English, including a magnificent version of the entire sequence of Shakespeare's Sonnets.

The Victorian age in England was not rich in translators, except for Rossetti, who projected Dante faithfully in his own translator's idiom, in a series of Pre-Raphaelite pictures; and Fitzgerald, who made the Rubaiyat, a most musical poem, out of the slender material of Omar Khayyam, giving it everything but life. Browning, who had scholarship, and a fine ear for his own poems, failed completely in his attempts to translate Greek tragedy. And Tennyson never even began.

Yeats, on the other hand, twenty years ago, with no knowledge, or very little, of Greek, was able to translate Sophocles into language as moving as any that has been heard on the modern stage.

A translation should be fresh and vigorous; it should be alive. That is the poet's first condition for keeping a translation, though it is often the scholar's last consideration. Great

translations have been made by poets who were not scholars, by poets who did not even know the language from which they were translating; and scholars who understood all that they were reading have left translations that are for the most part pedantic and dull. It would be absurd to suggest that scholarship is a hindrance; the more scholarly a poet is, the better. Yet it is certain that a poet will often grasp a work better by instinct than a scholar through examination and knowledge; for no scholarship is adequate which does not wait upon the instinct of poetry. A poet who does not know the language of the original labours under a disadvantage as he depends upon a scholar's translation for his material; and this, though reproducing the substance of the original poetry, may miss many subtleties implied in its cadences, meanings accessible to the ear which escape the analysis of the mind.

Often a poet may make use of a third language when he does not know the language of his original. I am told that Powys Mathers, who did not as far as I know write poetry of his own but who is certainly a poet in his translations, made all his translations from Eastern languages by means of French versions. It is possible for the original work, after suffering two sea-changes, to emerge more wonderful than ever, as though the third language by refraction had lent it a new iridescence; and the translation Mathers made of the Fifty Stanzas of Chauras, a first century Sanskrit poem, which in his English version he called "Black Marigolds", is one of the most beautiful poems in our language and a masterpiece in its own right.

It is a good rule for a translator of poetry that the shape of a leaf does not change if it is transplanted; and if his object is

to reproduce an equivalent poem in his own language he should allow the form of the original to work upon him in such a way that the same form is reproduced in his translation. This is often very difficult, sometimes impossible. A language like Italian, for example, so rich in rhyming feminine endings, lends itself to terza rima, but English does not; which explains why there will probably never be an English translation of the Divine Comedy which even approaches the beauty of the original. Among short poems there are lucky instances of a poem falling beautifully from one language into another, but there are few instances of a closely rhymed poem of short lines being perfectly rendered. The reason is obvious: the longer the lines are, the more alternatives of juxtaposition are presented to the translator, and he will be able to pick his most natural rhyme from these without having it forced upon him. Yet rhyme is the least of the difficulties. In translating from French, especially, the hardest thing is to reproduce the texture of the original. I should say that Villon presents his greatest difficulty in the words upon which he rhymes, usually uncompromising nouns, but that Verlaine has an almost irreproducible musical texture (only Dowson seems to have come near to it in English), while Mallarme, whose fastidious love of language, finding words as though each were a diamond, gives his poems their incomparable detachment, defies translation. Again, I have seen no English translation which reproduces the assonances of Spanish lyric poetry satisfactorily; and it seems that of all the major European languages German is the one best adapted to translation into English.

There are, of course, instances of very good translations where the translation has taken a new form, the form being partly dictated by the translator's language. In such cases it is more likely that the compatriots of the translator will be satisfied with his work than the compatriots of the original poet. To me, for instance, A. L. Lloyd's translation of Lorca's "Lament for the Death of a Bullfighter", which has the force of original poetry though it lacks the assonances of the original, is magnificent; but I am sure that a Spaniard would be disappointed in it.

In conclusion, then we may say this: that the translation of poetry presents a great many difficulties which may be largely overcome by the genius of the translator, but that certain forms and certain languages present more difficulties than others. A great unrhymed poem may often turn out to be more difficult than any because, like the words in Shakespeare's tragic speeches, each word has an unalterable value, an inevitability on relation to the whole passage. Yet, just as Shakespeare and Racine were both able to make the highest use of Greek tragedy, so the highest poetry will always bear fruit in other languages even if it does not always find the form of direct translation.

There remains the question of reduction or innovation if a literal translation cannot be achieved. It was Keats who said that "poetry should surprise by a sweet excess"; but a poet turning in his grave might find this particular excess a bitter thing. He would see something in the translation which was not in his original work. Does it matter? I do not think so, if it is something essential to the fulfilment of the translated poem, something he



himself would have chosen. And if something is lost? That is more serious; but it is better to lose a detail than to lose unity. The original poet is not infallible; his work might sometimes have been better.

I quote a poem Goethe wrote in his seventy-ninth year to show that poets are not always dissatisfied with the work of translators.

#### EIN GLEICHNIS

Jungst pfluckt' ich einen Wiesenstrauss,  
 Trug ihn gedankervöll nach Haus;  
 Da hatten von der warmen Hand  
 Die Kronen sich alle zur Erde gewandt.  
 Ich setzte sie in frisches Glas,  
 Und welch ein Wunder war mir das!  
 Die Kopfchen hoben sich empor,  
 Die Blatterstengle im grünen Flor;  
 Und allzusammen so gesund,  
 Als stunden sie noch auf Muttergrung.

So war mir's, als ich wundersam  
 Mein Lied in fremder Sprache vernaham.

#### A LIKENESS

I picked some flowers that I saw bloom  
 In a field, and thoughtfully carried them home;  
 But soon their heads, in the warm hand bound,  
 Had fallen, and limply hung to the ground.  
 I put them in water, in a fresh glass;  
 Next, what a wonder came to pass!  
 The little heads lifted up straightway,  
 And the stems of the leaves in green display;  
 And altogether so healthy and sound  
 As if they still stood on their mother-ground.

So seemed it to me when miracle-sprung  
 I heard my song in a foreign tongue.

"The Poetry of W. B. Yeats"  
The Listener, January 22, 1948, 143

Watkins visited the aging and ill W. B. Yeats at his Riversdale home near Dublin in the summer of 1938. The great Irishman received him with slightly amused tolerance, condescending to discuss poetry, the Psychological Research Society, the clergy in Ireland, Hitler, flowers, criticism, the BBC, and many poets, including Dylan Thomas, Blake, Burns, Kipling, Valery, Verlaine, Synge, Dowson, Johnson, Elouard, Edith Sitwell, and W. E. Henley. The Welsh poet, panting with adoration, burst into passionate praise of everything Yeats ever wrote just as he was about to leave; Yeats, smiling, did not reply. Immediately after this conversation, on the way home, Watkins began the ballad Yeats in Dublin. Yeats' letter thanking Watkins for this long commemorative poem is the only record of his impression of Watkins; a shame, for it would be nice to know what Yeats thought of being told that The King of the Great Clock Tower was his best play.

Of itself this visit had no effect on Watkins' poetry, for he had always admired Yeats, nor did he accept the opinions Yeats advanced on psychic phenomena or French poetry. But Watkins was delighted to find that he composed much as Yeats did, that they agreed on fundamental matters of poetry and philosophy. This agreement, coupled with thorough knowledge of all Yeats' work and awareness of sharing sources (Blake, Plotinus, von Hugel and others), made Watkins feel more qualified than any critic to comment on Yeats. Therefore, here and elsewhere, he adopts a tone of finality when speaking of Yeats.

1948

The Poetry of W. B. Yeats  
 (A Letter to The Listener)

I listened with great pleasure to Mr. James Stephens' second talk on W. B. Yeats, the talk devoted to his poetry. It is better, perhaps, to state one great truth about a poet than a great many half-truths. Mr. Stephens stated such a truth. Yeats's poetry is founded on certainty, on affirmation; and Mr. Stephens was able to indicate how patiently that certainty at the core of his composition waited, through years of revision, for its final effect. Yeats's certainty, or faith, as Blake would have called it, was of so deep a character that where he doubted he made of doubt a positive thing. There is an instance at the end of the poem which opens his book, Responsibilities, the poem addressed to his old fathers:

Pardon, that for a barren passion's sake,  
 Although I have come close on forty-nine,  
 I have no child, I have nothing but a book,  
 Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine.

The question I would like to ask Mr. Stephens is whether a draft or plan exists of the third 'Byzantium' poem to which he referred. Mr. Stephens called the second 'Byzantium' poem the strangest poem in the language; but in the light of Yeats's actual journey, described in 'Sailing to Byzantium', and of the imaginative journey to which this corresponded, we recognize again the sustained development of his later thought, in which Byzantium is a recurrent symbol of vision. In this poem Yeats again examines the soul's relation to works of art; he finds that architect and goldsmith have set up miracles of workmanship to stand in mockery of 'all that man is'. Yet this is only half of what they have done,

for the works of art, the cathedral dome, the mosaic pavement and the golden bird, continue to have a power of purgation over all 'blood-begotten spirits' who come near them. Certainly 'Byzantium' is, in isolation, a very strange poem; but as soon as it is related to the rest of Yeats's work it loses much of its strangeness and gains incalculably in power.

Finally, Mr. Stephens' talk left the impression that 'Byzantium', written in 1930, was Yeats's crowning achievement. Yet the thought inherent in 'Byzantium' was carried still further in the last poems. It is found again in 'Lapis Lazuli', a stranger, though less dazzling masterpiece, where Yeats, with a subtlety he never excelled, recalls that ancient miracle, the joy underlying suffering, the inviolable joy of creation, artists as world-builders triumphing over suffering and death.

He describes three Chinamen in a lapis lazuli carving climbing a mountain above a scene of desolation:

There, on the mountain and the sky,  
 On all the tragic scene they stare.  
 One asks for mournful melodies;  
 Accomplished fingers begin to play.  
 Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,  
 Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.

Yet it was always the relation of perfection to the soul that Yeats examined. The poet in Yeats never set up an idol in his art; he was never, in any sense, a Parnassian.

"The Lady with the Unicorn"  
The Listener, January 20, 1949, 110

This short letter is included here because it is Watkins' only comment on one of his most difficult poems. The "sense of harmony, valid for all ages" of which he speaks here is one of the main themes of The Lady with the Unicorn, and of all his poetry. It is the ecstatic moment that transcends time yet, somehow, includes all time; it is seeing the world in a grain of sand while at the same time being aware of every Minute Particular.

Several of Watkins' poems are based on works of art. "The Healing of the Leper" was suggested by Botticelli's painting of that name, "The Cave Drawing" by the caves at Lascaux, "Deposition" by Ceri Richards' painting of the crucifixion, and "Angelo's Adam" by the Sistine. (The first two of these poems are in The Lady with the Unicorn, the third in Fidelities, and the fourth in Affinities.)

1949

'The Lady with the Unicorn'  
(A Letter to The Listener)

A number of critics, including your own reviewer of my book The Lady with the Unicorn, seem to have mistaken the background of the title poem.

This series of tapestries, showing the five senses and the sixth, was woven in France at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The origin of the tapestries is unknown, but it is thought that they were ordered by Jean Chabannes-Vandenesse in honour of his fiancée Claude Le Viste. The tapestries hang in the Musée de Cluny in Paris. In my poem I have tried to interpret the sense of harmony, valid for all ages, which those tapestries gave me when I saw them for the first time at the Paris Exhibition of Tapestry in 1946.

"Mr. Dylan Thomas--Innovation and Tradition"  
The Times, November 10, 1953

This often-quoted obituary shows no sign of the near-despair under which it was written. Watkins was with Daniel Jones, another old friend of Thomas, on November 6, 1953, when Jones telephoned St. Vincent's Hospital in New York to relay medical information from Thomas' Swansea doctor. They were told that their friend was in great danger. Upon arriving home, Watkins received a request from The Times to write Thomas' obituary. He never forgot that shock; it was somehow the culmination of all the shocks and pain in his friendship with Thomas. His love for Dylan Thomas was never repaid, and probably never understood.

When they met in the summer of 1935, Watkins and Thomas were delighted to discover that their styles, developed separately, were very similar. 1935 to 1940 was an important transitional period for both poets; Thomas was working toward simplicity, Watkins away from it. Yet their few war poems are also similar, particularly in content, perhaps because they were criticizing and helping each other's writing as late as 1945. After the war, they saw each other rarely.

Letters to Vernon Watkins (London: Faber and Faber and Dent, 1957), Watkins' edition of Thomas' letters to him, is the main source of information about their friendship, both personal and literary.

1953

## Mr. Dylan Thomas---Innovation and Tradition

(The Times Obituary)

Dylan Marlais Thomas was born at Swansea in 1914. He was educated at Swansea Grammar School, where his father, who died last year, was senior English master. He began writing early, and at the age of 12 he was able to show his parents and his friends poems which seemed to have no direct ancestry in English poetry. These poems already bore the marks of the strong individuality in pattern-making and choice of language which was to distinguish him from all his fellow-writers in maturity.

He had developed at school a passionate feeling for language which was sharpened and intensified by an acute destructive judgment. He took no reputation for granted. He approached the great masters of his art with an impudent suspicion, because, from the first, he distrusted the academic approach. Yet, when they had walked with him through the furnace of his own imagination and emerged unscathed, there was no man who loved them more. Indeed, no poet of the English language has so hoodwinked and confuted his critics. None has ever worn more brilliantly the mask of anarchy to conceal the true face of tradition. There was nothing God ever made that Dylan Thomas, the revolutionary, wanted to alter. The careful compounder of explosive imagery believed only in calm.

At the age when Rimbaud wrote his poems Dylan Thomas had left school and was working as a reporter for the South Wales Evening Post. His first poems, apart from those which had appeared in the school magazine, were printed in the Sunday Referee. He had also



at this time begun to write short stories. Then, finding newspaper writing and his own work incompatible, he left the newspaper and lived for a time in London, sharing a flat with two of his Swansea friends. Here his literary work continued, and he developed rapidly his researches into the power of language. He directed his various gifts to the concentration of verbal energy in a pattern at once musical and compact. His poems reflected the fiery, Blake-like passion of his vision, while his early stories explored the relation between immediate reality and archetypal symbols.

#### The Early Poems

When in 1934 Dylan Thomas's first book, Eighteen Poems, was published, its impact was immediate and profound. It was at once realized by discerning readers, among whom Edith Sitwell was one of the first, that this poet had created an idiom; that he had disturbed the roots of our language in an organic way and given it a new vitality. There was nothing stale or imitative in the book: The poems were fastidiously worked; they were poems of a man who had listened, not once but a hundred times, to the minute effects of words. It is true that still, in 1936, when this was followed by Twenty-One Poems, the poet had not yet found his most permanent and compelling medium of expression. Yet there was nothing topical in his work. The most mistaken of his admirers were those who loved it for its novelty. It was, even in its first phases, an ancient poetry, not rejecting antiquity for the present but seeking, with every device of language, the ancestry of the moment.

#### "The Map of Love"

If the poetry of his first two books had been admired for the

wrong reasons, the poems printed in his third book, The Map of Love, could hardly suffer the same fate. Whereas the first book leaves an impression that the poet could extend his stanzas from the fund of invention and verbal felicities at his command, and that the same prescription could produce new poems, there is no such impression left by the poems in The Map of Love. Each is an experience perceived and controlled by the religious sense and each answers its own questions. He has pared his imagery without losing any of his force; and these poems close with the statement at the end of the poem for his twenty-fourth birthday:

In the final direction of the elementary town  
I advance for as long as forever is.

The Map of Love contained also a set of stories which were clearly the work of the same hand, and these were followed two years later by the humourous stories, in quite a different vein, which Dylan Thomas collected under the title A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog. These stories, about the poet's own boyhood, written from direct experience in Swansea and the Gower peninsula, may seem to some to carry the fault of exaggerated statement, but they are as true to life as his own personality was to his friends.

#### Innovations in the Stanza

It is, however, upon the poems in Deaths and Entrances (1946) and the few poems of the slim volume In Country Sleep, published in America in 1951, that his reputation as one of the greatest masters of English poetry is likely to rest. In these Dylan Thomas has not only used to perfection the idiom he himself created but has invented stanza forms which are themselves organic and which redouble the force of the entire poem. These poems form the final

section of his Collected Poems, published last year.

During the war Dylan Thomas, who was always interested in the cinema, made several documentary films. His book, The Doctor and the Devils, published earlier this year, is the first instance of a film-script being printed before any film of it has been made. Among his unpublished works are several poems and a radio play, a part of which was printed in the half-yearly Italian review, Botteghe Oscure. The scene of this play is a Welsh village, and parts of it have been performed in New York.

#### Gift for Mimicry

In recent years Dylan Thomas had made several tours of American universities, giving readings of poetry and lectures. His reading of poetry, and particularly of his own poems (which he confessed that he did not like reading) was unrivalled; and he was almost equally accomplished in reading humorous scripts of an unparalleled adjectival richness, which were among the most popular wireless features of our time. His gift of mimicry could make each character of his stories distinct and unforgettable. He loved people. He did not write only for the few but also "for the lovers...Who pay no praise or wages Nor heed my craft or art."

Dylan Thomas had intended, before returning to England from this last tour, to work with Stravinsky on the libretto of an opera. It is likely that by his death the world has lost a masterpiece. What it has not lost is the work of a poet who was able to live Christianity in a public way, and whose work distilled it-- a poet narrow and severe with himself and wide and forgiving in his affections. Innocence is always a paradox, and Dylan Thomas presents in retrospect, the greatest paradox of our time.

"Written to an Instrument"

Broadcast November 25, 1953 on the Welsh Home Service

Watkins speaks here of his "natural clumsiness" as if "clumsiness" were the opposite of "facility." He means, rather, that he had facility which was really a hindrance, for his great skill (he could versify anything) was not accompanied by the ability to criticize his own work. "I am as critical of my poems as Hopkins was of his music," he would say. That is why he needed the "instrument" of which he speaks here, the inner voice that told him whether or not a poem was finished. Most critics would say that the "instrument" sometimes failed him; then the facility took over, and he wrote good magazine verse.

The first poem in this typical reading, "Woodpecker and Lyre-Bird," echoes "The Poet's Voice" (above, p. ) in the last stanza, where he says "The poem is shaped by belief." The second poem here, later entitled "Taliesin and the Mockers," was suggested by the Welsh Hanes Taliesin. "Waterfalls" was not published in a volume until 1963, when it appeared in Affinities in a slightly different form. "Woodpecker and Lyre-Bird" and "The Caryatids" (dedicated to Watkins' first child, his daughter Rhiannon) are from The Death Bell, "Loiterers" and "Peace in the Welsh Hills" are from Cypress and Acacia, and "Taliesin and the Mockers," with its companion-piece "Taliesin's Voyage," is from Affinities.

## Written to an Instrument

The poems I am going to read were all written to an instrument. I am not able to describe the instrument; I only know its demands. When I have made twenty or thirty drafts of a poem it is the instrument that tells me that it is still not right. There is no harder work, but I suppose it would be unnecessary if I were not naturally so clumsy.

I began writing lyric poems when I was very young. The impulse to write came from a sense that my imagination had been liberated, as if by an oracle. The word had been spoken, and my responsibility was over: I had only now to impose my freedom upon the poem; any revision would be an act of interference, an impure act.

There are certain kinds of poetry in which the spontaneous method of composition, such as I have described, is better than any other. It is a question of intensity, and of freedom. You can, if you are a poet, write in free forms and leave the imagination in chains; or you may, by a pure accident, produce the exhilaration peculiar to great poetry. Where this happens it will be found, on closer examination, that the passage has a strict form: it was a strict accident in the flow of freedom. This persuades me that the freedom offered to a poet is not offered on easy terms; a lyric poet must refuse rhetoric, and be attentive to the possibility of freedom within the restraint of the poem, a freedom much greater and more rewarding to the imagination than any other. The lyric poet who neglects the instrument has chosen an easier freedom because he could not wait for a freedom more

intense, more difficult to obtain.

The first poem I am going to read was suggested to me by the flight of a green woodpecker. This heavy flight, never leaving earth for long, represented to my eye the burden of poetry; and I called the poem:

#### WOODPECKER AND LYRE-BIRD

On gorse displaying that greenish  
 Glittering enamelled plumage,  
 Startled, he skimmed rock, leaving  
 A stone-grey socket of light.  
 He had seen me, sudden to vanish,  
 Gone, bequeathing an image  
 Of weighted brilliance, achieving  
 In loops its ponderous flight.

Too shy at heart, of a hurt  
 I would never do him possessed,  
 He cut through these rocks like a cordon.  
 I looked: again he was there.  
 The green-sunned wings, head alert,  
 Keen talons and scarlet crest  
 On a cry evicted, low burden,  
 Too rich, too heavy for air.

Why did the ancients fear them?  
 Wisdom belongs to the birds.  
 They seek for their preservation  
 A wit they teach to their young;  
 Fly when a foot comes near them,  
 Make light of sibylline words,  
 Turn leaves with a murmur  
 Or naked cry of the tongue.

Where the woodpecker chances to rest  
 He changes hollow and fold,  
 Makes fallow and rocky places  
 Vibrate, as though to a bell.  
 They ruffle the ground who best  
 Refine the horizon's gold;  
 The design of outer spaces  
 In the inmost they excel.

Primaeval music is most  
 Itself that escapes the throng,  
 Catches fire from a thorn,  
 Of the nearest leaf takes hold.  
 Taliesin, body and ghost,

Compelled his muscular song  
 To gather glory unborn  
 From a glory already old.

This lyre-bird holds to man  
 The covenant caught in a leaf,  
 All space, all distance treasured  
 By the architectural wing.  
 Lost art's unsearchable span,  
 The poem is shaped by belief:  
 If the song is justly measured  
 The dead may be heard to sing.

The Welsh poet Taliesin, who claimed to have lived in all ages, is to Welsh poetry the archetype of inspiration, as Orpheus was to the Greeks; and I have put into his mouth my next poem. It is addressed by Taliesin to his master, Elphin. Elphin, looking for salmon in his weir, has found the child Taliesin caught there in a coracle. He asks the child who he is, and this is Taliesin's answer:

Before men walked  
 I was in these places.  
 I was here  
 When the mountains were laid.

I saw black night  
 Flung wide like a curtain.  
 I looked up  
 At the making of stars.

I stood erect  
 At the birth of rivers.  
 I beheld  
 The designing of flowers.

God prescribed  
 The paths of the planets.  
 His fingers scattered  
 The distant stars.

He shaped the grave shore's  
 Ringing stones  
 And gave to the rocks  
 An echoing core.

He bound great mountains  
 With snow and ice

And bathed in glory  
The lesser hills.

He made the sun  
Of sulphurous fire;  
From secret darkness  
He called the moon.

Under her voice  
And moving light  
He chained the tides  
Of the great seas rolling.

Still upon Earth  
Was no live creature.  
Barren still  
Was the womb of the sea.

Marrowed with air  
He made the birds.  
Fish He sowed  
In the restless wave.

Antelope, horse  
And bull He made.  
From caves of ice  
He released the stormwinds.

He numbered the meadow's  
Drops of rain  
Caught in the cloud  
And the teeming rose-bush.

Lions He reared  
In lonely places,  
Fiery sand  
And the beasts of burden.

He gave to the trees  
Mysterious fruits,  
And twined in the husk  
Miraculous corn.

Where lizards breathed  
In the pathless desert  
He gave each atom  
A hidden sun.

Last, all labour  
He bent on dust.  
Out of the red dust  
Made He Man.



He built for him  
 His eternal garden,  
 Timeless, moving,  
 And yet in time.

He cast on him  
 Dark veils of sleep.  
 Out of his side  
 He took the Female.

Ask my age:  
 You shall have no answer.  
 I saw the building  
 Of Babel's Tower.

I was a lamp  
 In Solomon's temple.  
 I, the reed  
 Of an auguring wind.

What do you seek  
 In the salmon river,  
 Caught in the net,  
 What living gold?

What do you seek  
 In the weir, O Elphin?  
 You must know  
 That the sun is mine.

I have a gift  
 For I have nothing.  
 I have love  
 Which excels all treasures.

Certain there were  
 Who touched, who knew Him.  
 Blind men knew  
 On the road their God.

Mock me and mock:  
 My music stands  
 Before and after  
 Accusing silence.

My next poem is almost conversational, a short poem evoking  
 childhood. Its title is:

#### LOITERERS

This my birthplace? No, friend, this is Xanion's,  
 He, the owner of that yellow barley.  
 Mischievous chicory was all I planted:  
 Blue-eyed, we played here.

O, could the mayfly of memory wing back  
Through bee-bustle and waspish digressions,  
Certainly here it would find us standing,  
Left in this cart-rut.

There the house glinted, near the tilting hay-rick,  
Down through rose-ramblers to the prosperous earth-mould.  
There the sky flashed to the windows, and the windows  
Flashed to our young eyes.

Dawn's early singers, missei-thrush and skylark,  
Still mark the track we followed to the cornfield.  
Foxgloves in midge-light hid the turning river  
Swept by the swallows.

Fallen is the house to the earth-mould, fallen.  
Quick, for we lag here. If the dust is pollen  
Robbed by the butterfly, stolen by the mayfly,  
Why should we sigh, then?

The next poem, WATERFALLS, is an elegy, and equally short. Nothing is so evocative as water. This is a poem about returning to a particular place and finding that people one always took for granted are no longer living there.

#### WATERFALLS

Always in that valley in Wales I hear the noise  
Of waters falling.

There is a clump of trees  
We climbed for nuts; and high in the trees the boys  
Would cross, and branches cracking under their knees  
Would break and make in the winter wood new gaps.  
The leafmould covering the ground was almost black,  
But speckled and striped were the nuts we threw in our caps,  
Secret as chestnuts when they are tipped from a sack  
Glossy and new.

Always in that valley in Wales  
I hear that sound, those voices. They keep fresh  
What ripens, falls, drops into darkness, fails,  
And glides from village memory, slips through the mesh,  
And is not, when we come again.

I look:  
Voices are under the bridge, and that voice calls,  
Now late, and answers;

then there is only the brook  
Reminding the stones where, under a breath, it falls.

Now I shall read a poem addressed to a sleeping child. She sleeps in a house on the top of a cliff above a stormy sea, and I imagine

her guarded by tall, erect figures, Caryatids, bearing upon their heads urns of patience and inspiration.

How still the Caryatids  
 Hold up their sleeping urns  
 Above the dreaming lids.  
 Hark, and the sound returns  
 Of time's remembered wrack.  
 Loud the wave breaks, and loud  
 The dragging wash ebbs back,  
 Threading a moonlit shroud.

In dread of lightning now  
 A towering breaker brings  
 Blackness beneath the Plough  
 And scatters seabirds' wings  
 Sleeping upon its crest.  
 The wild Earth wanders there  
 Stunned by the moon's unrest  
 Where seaweeds like gold hair

Cling to a dazzling shell.  
 Cold are these waters, cold  
 The tale no lips can spell  
 Asleep in that white fold;  
 Yet the grave arms how strong,  
 Supporting, while seas broke,  
 The balanced urns of song  
 Under the lightning-stroke.

Agressive candour plays  
 Already in your eyes  
 Teaching you daring ways,  
 Lending your bold replies  
 An elemental charm  
 Pure as the light of dawn.  
 And how could I disarm  
 A truth so finely drawn

From the dark sheath of sleep?  
 You are not six years old;  
 Yet the first wash will keep,  
 Whatever life re-mould  
 With brush or palette-knife  
 Afterwards on the page.  
 And I, who watch your life  
 Against the uncertain age

Momentously at rest,  
 Already see divined

The joy by which we are lest  
 Moving in eyes declined.  
 How should I pray? My prayer  
 Found in closed eyelids stands  
 While seawaves pierce night's air  
 And pound the unyielding sands.

There all the reckoned grains  
 Obey the rock-like Word  
 Whose lightning love remains,  
 Waiting to be restored.  
 And still how patiently  
 They watch above your bed,  
 Nor touch the form I see.  
 Like footprints on the sea,  
 How near is love to dread!

Poetry is a struggle between spirit and pattern. That is why a poem dominated by a pattern is bound to be unsatisfactory. To my ear, at least, the demands of the instrument are shallow in relation to pattern but profound in relation to cadence.

The last poem I am going to read is called PEACE IN THE WELSH HILLS. This poem, which is in blank verse, is a poem of double impact, out of which I have tried to make a single impression. In looking at the extraordinary tranquillity of the hills of Carmarthenshire and Cardigan I was remembering the tranquillity of certain towns in Northern Italy which I had seen a couple of months before.

#### PEACE IN THE WELSH HILLS

Calm is the landscape when the storm has passed,  
 Brighter the fields, and fresh with fallen rain.  
 Where gales beat out new colour from the hills  
 Rivers fly faster, and upon their banks  
 Birds preen their wings, and irises revive.  
 Not so the cities burnt alive with fire  
 Of man's destruction: when their smoke is spent,  
 No phoenix rises from the ruined walls.

I ponder now the grief of many rooms.  
 Was it a dream, that age, when fingers found  
 Satisfaction sleeping in dumb stone,  
 When walls were built responding to the touch

In whose high gables, in the lengthening days,  
 Martins would nest? Through crops, though lives, would fail,  
 Though friends dispersed, unchanged the walls would stay,  
 And still those wings return to build in Spring.

Here, where the earth is green, where heaven is true  
 Opening the windows touched with earliest dawn,  
 In the first frost of cool September days,  
 Chrysanthemum weather, presaging great birth,  
 Who in his heart could murmur or complain:  
 'The light we look for is not in this land'?  
 That light is present, and that distant time  
 Is always here, continually redeemed.

There is a city we must build with joy,  
 Exactly where the fallen city sleeps.  
 There is one road through village, town and field  
 On whose robust foundations Cnaucer dreamed  
 A ride could wed the opposites in man.  
 There proud walls may endure, and low walls feed  
 The imagination if they have a vine  
 Or shadowy barn made rich with gathered corn.

Great mansions fear from their surrounding trees  
 The invasion of a wintry desolation  
 Filling their rooms with leaves. And cottages  
 Bring the sky down as flickering candles do,  
 Leaning on their own shadows. I have seen  
 Vases and polished brass reflect black windows  
 And draw the ceiling down to their vibrations,  
 Thick, deep, and white-washed, like a bank of snow.

To live entwined in pastoral loveliness  
 May rest the eyes, throw pictures on the mind,  
 But most we need a metaphor of stone  
 Such as those painters had whose mountain-cities  
 Cast long, low shadows on the Umbrian hills.  
 There, in some courtyard on the cobbled stone,  
 A fountain plays, and through a cherub's mouth  
 Ages are linked by water in the sunlight.

All of good faith that fountain may recall,  
 Woman, musician, boy, or else a scholar  
 Reading a Latin book. They seem distinct,  
 And yet are one, because tranquillity  
 Affirms the Judgment. So, in these Welsh hills,  
 I marvel, waking from a dream of stone,  
 That such a peace surrounds me, while the city  
 For which all long has never yet been built.

"First Choice"

The Poetry Book Society Bulletin, 1 (May 1954)

The Poetry Book Society's faith in The Death Bell, its first choice for subscribers upon being founded in 1954, was justified by the many excellent notices it received and its almost immediate reprinting. The book established Watkins' reputation and made it clear that he was not an Apocalyptic hangover from the middle forties, but a modern poet with his own idiom.

The few comments Watkins makes here include his only reference to his ballads.

1954

## First Choice of the Poetry Book Society

I prefer my poems to speak for themselves, but I have been asked to supply a note about the poems and also about my method of composition.

I began writing when I was very young. I collected the English poets one by one, starting at the age of seven. My imagination was stirred by lyric poetry more than by any other kind of reading. Twenty years later I became aware that writers of poetry are of two kinds, those who write to an instrument and those who neglect the instrument for the sake of action, leaving it, as it were, in the next room. My own poems all belong to the first category. I believe that the freedom offered to a lyric poet is not offered on easy terms; he must refuse rhetoric, and be attentive to the possibility of freedom within the restraint of the poem, a freedom much greater and more rewarding to the imagination than any other. The poet who makes fifty drafts for the sake of one knows this, and he understands that the poet who neglects this instrument has chosen an easier freedom because he has not the patience or perserverance to listen. Poetry is the interest of many, but the vocation of very few.

I have been told that the occasional expositions of my poems which I have read on the air are more obscure than the poems themselves, and perhaps this is inevitable. A poet is able to throw light on the source of a poem, but he cannot simplify it; he can only make it more difficult. The true simplicity of a good poem is always intricate and difficult, and the false simplicity

of a prose paraphrase is bound to render it inaccessible. The most one can do is to state the theme. Perhaps I should go no further until I have quoted an example. Here is a note I made stating the theme of one of the poems in this book The Death Bell, 'Egyptian Burial, Resurrection in Wales': 'In ancient Egypt the mummified body of a queen was commonly swathed in masterpieces of art written upon papyrus. Wine-vessels, money, and ears of corn were laid close at hand as they would be needed on the soul's journey. These were for sustenance and the manuscript for protection. The mummy and the tomb were themselves works of art in which every detail was important. The rarefied nature of the dead would carry with it all that was purest and richest in life, and only that.

'The first three verses of the poem show the confidence of the workmen in the power of art to overcome all evil spirits. They are possessed by the faith that the dead life is enriched in the measure in which they have enriched its tomb.

'In the last three verses of the poem the confidence of the workmen is shaken by the soul's experience, and the mummy herself now knows that the widow who cast her two mites into the treasury, which was all that she had, had made the right preparation for death. Egyptian burial represents pre-Christian exaltation; resurrection in Wales represents Christian humility. Emerging from one into the other, the mummy has died, and is born.'

I should say something also about my ballads. The ballad form is, of course, as old as poetry itself, and one of the laws attaching to it seems to be that it must be hammered and beaten



and knocked into shape until it is as hard and anonymous as a pebble on the shore.

My own ballads have a great deal in common with those of the tradition. They are all rhythmical and intended to be read aloud; and in some I use a refrain. They are not in any sense private poems. Yet here the likeness ends. These ballads are elemental and they belong to myth, but they do not belong to history. In these it is not the narrative but the metaphysical situation that counts, and the symbols surrounding the situation.

"Dylan Thomas and the Spoken Word"  
Times Literary Supplement, LII, 2755 (November 19, 1954), 731

This personal, rather than critical, review of Quite Early One Morning is remarkable for its humour and a few quick "snapshots," as it were, of Thomas.

## Dylan Thomas and the Spoken Word

(A Review of Quite Early One Morning)

August Bank Holiday. A tune on an ice-cream cornet. A slap of sea and a tickle of sand. A fanfare of sunshades opening. A wince and whinny of bathers dancing into deceptive water. A tuck of dresses. A rolling of trousers. A compromise of paddlers. A sunburn of girls and a lark of boys. A silent hullabaloo of balloons.

I remember the sea telling lies in a shell held to my ear for a whole, harmonious, hollow minute by a small, wet girl in an enormous bathing suit marked "Corporation Property."

I remember sharing the last of my moist buns with a boy and a lion. Tawny and savage with cruel nails and capacious mouth, the little boy tore and devoured. Wild as seed-cake, ferocious as a hearthrug, the depressed and verminous lion nibbled like a mouse at his half a bun, and hiccuped in the sad dusk of his cage.

So begins "Holiday Memory," broadcast by Dylan Thomas in 1946, the fifth of the twenty-two talks and parts of talks collected in this volume. It is a characteristic passage. To say that the style of these talks is inimitable would be a considerable understatement. Many writers have been able to evoke the pictures of childhood, but none has done so through the particular medium which Dylan Thomas chose. The excitement is conveyed, not through narrative, but through an exact and intuitive use of words. Verlaine used to try his words by repeating them, rolling them on his tongue and spitting them out, alone in his room. Yeats sometimes used a similar method, and Dylan Thomas certainly did. When he was looking for an adjective in his poetry he would try fifty or a hundred, and reject them all. Even in his prose, which came to him much more easily, he studied with great diligence the effects of words, and his imagination was satisfied only with such word-linkings and juxtapositions as matched a rooted common experience to anarchy and the element of surprise.

Like all great clowns he was sad; but the gaiety and exuberance of this book are positive and indestructible. We are told in the "blurb" that it was proposed by the author just before he left on what was to be his last journey to New York; and Mr. Aneirin Talfan Davies, of the B. B. C. Welsh Service, who has carefully edited the talks, says in his preface that this collection constitutes with Under Milk Wood all that can be preserved in print of his contribution to the broadcasting medium in this country. It is regrettable that more has not been preserved, for there were many other talks. One wonders what has happened to his dissertation on Abadan, or why the scripts of his two appearances on television, particularly the second, which was printed in The Listener, could not have been added to the book. The editor, who does not refer to these omissions, has divided the talks into two parts, the first twelve relating to the poet's experiences in childhood and afterwards, and the last ten relating to writers and to poetry.

It is impossible to close the book without regret, without an infinite sense of loss. Dylan Thomas as a broadcaster was unique. His place in sound radio was equivalent to Chaplin's place in the silent film. The depth and range of these talks is extraordinary, and extraordinary in its depth and subtle variations was the voice which gave them life. When he broadcast he found it necessary to take off his coat, for he used a great deal of invisible gesture. This was his true medium. In television he was magnificent, but physically uneasy, and he wore his coat.

In his poetry Dylan Thomas worked with great patience. He believed there was no harder work than the making of poems, and he

understood, too, that the sole purpose of that work was to wait upon those accidents which would make the poem magical and permanent. He expressed these beliefs in a discussion with James Stephens, his part of which is the last item in the book. The discussion itself was perhaps the least satisfactory of all the broadcasts. No sympathetic contact was made between the two poets, and all that emerged from their embarrassing proximity was one irreconcilable monologue impinging on another in a discordant friction. The moral of this was clear: Dylan Thomas's imaginative world was a very complete one, and he was at his best when he was left alone. It is possible to resent interference of another kind, though this occurs only at the beginning. The first and earliest of these talks, broadcast at the beginning of 1943, was originally called "Nostalgia for an Ugly Town"; and it ended in a piece of direct statement. The last sentence of the talk, "The fine, live people, the spirit of Wales itself," did not belong to the original script, but was diplomatically added, there being an unwritten rule that all talks on the Welsh service should end with the spirit of Wales. At the same time the title was changed to the dull and much less personal "Reminiscences of Childhood," lest the ugly town which he loved should be offended. It is true that there is no evidence of interference with the script itself, every phrase of which, except the last, rings true; but even such a small concession, which to a writer means really a very big one, would not have been made a few years later. Producers had then become wiser, and Dylan Thomas was wiser, too.

Which of these talks is the best? How is it possible to decide?

In only one, on Sir Philip Sidney, does Dylan Thomas wear for a short time a mask which does not seem to be his own. Even this is full of brilliant things, but there is less spontaneity because one feels that he would not have carried an historical background to Sidney's poetry in his head, unless he had to. Historical data did, to a certain extent, cramp his style, as though he were collaborating. The most dazzling of all the talks is perhaps "The Festival Exhibition, 1951," and the most moving "Return Journey." In "Return Journey" he used a soft, quick and intimate voice, the exact tone of his natural conversation. This is the most intimate, the most strictly autobiographical of all the talks, and the most Welsh. It describes his return after the war to bombed Swansea, in search of the child he had ceased to be. He tells it, and the script is dramatized for other voices. The journey ends in the park of the "Hunchback in the Park" poem, Cwmdonkin Park, where he had played as a child. When he was gathering material for this talk he expounded his plan and he took great trouble to get the exact sequence of shops in the Swansea streets which had been obliterated in the fire-raids of February, 1941.

It was these talks, into which Dylan Thomas poured all the echoes and vitality of his extremely sociable life, that made possible his final masterpiece, Under Milk Wood. In one of them, written in 1945 when he was living in Newquay in Cardiganshire, the first seeds of that masterpiece are already apparent. This is the talk from which the book takes its title. The author walks through the small Welsh sea town in the early morning and watches it waking up.

The town was not yet awake. Birds sang in the eaves, bushes, trees, on telegraph wires, rails, fences, spars and wet masts, not

for love or joy but to keep other birds away. The landlords in feathers disputed the right of even the flying light to perch and descend.

The characters of Under Milk Wood are foreshadowed:

What big seas of dreams ran in the captain's sleep? Over what blue-whaled waves did he sail through a rainbow hail of flying-fishes to the music of Circe's swinish island? Do not let him be dreaming of dividends and bottled beer and onions.

And in the closing verses of the talk, where each verse is given to a character, we meet one of them:

Open the curtains, light the fire, what are servants for?  
I am Mrs. Ogmore Pritchard and I want another snooze.  
Dust the china, feed the canary, sweep the drawing-room floor;  
And before you let the sun in, mind he wipes his shoes.

Incidentally, it is a pity that the first sentence of this title-talk has a misprint, a full-stop that should not be there, and that the first verse of "The Hunchback in the Park" has the same mistake; but the book is carelessly printed.

Two of the talks were recorded at the same time, and they are the last of all: the fragment "Laugharne" which he wrote for a broadcast about the village where he lived for fifteen years and is now buried, and the sardonic but prophetic "A Visit to America." Both are as witty and original as anything in the book, the first packed with affection, the second seething with a tolerant disgust. He allied merciless penetration to an acute gift of mimicry and self-parody. He loved life. He loved people, and in certain places he loved the way they lived, but in other places it sickened him. "Laugharne" is the very last thing he wrote for this book. The recording of it was broadcast four days before he died. The first broadcast of "A Visit to America," which was written a good deal earlier, was scheduled for the day which turned out to be the day of

the poet's funeral, so it was postponed until March, 1954.

From his first beginnings, both in poetry and prose, Dylan Thomas had moved from a haunted, confused and symbol-charged shaping-place in the direction of the living voice. Even at twenty-four he had begun to find it, and from that time the natural world engaged his imagination with increasing power. It was no longer artificial symbols, but living people, and dead people, that he cared for. He never, however, lost his preoccupation with words, and it is doubtful whether any writer, cramming his work with life, joy and gaiety, has used words with greater cunning. The writer he most resembles, in his inexhaustible spring of language and ideas, is Dickens, especially in his list of people at the Festival Exhibition in 1951:

...people too bored to yawn, long and rich as borzois, who, before they have seen it, have seen better shows in Copenhagen and San Francisco; eccentric people: men with deerstalker caps tied with rope to their lapels, who carry dried nut sandwiches and little containers of yoghurt in hairy green knapsacks labelled "glass with care"; fat, flustered women in as many layers of coats as an onion or a cab-driver, hunting in a fever through fifty fluffed pockets to find a lost packet of bird-seed they are going to give to the parrots who are not there....

How differently he worked in verse may be seen from his reading and introduction of "Three Poems," in the second section of the book. There, in discussing the "poem in preparation" which was to be called "In Country Heaven," he gives us a glimpse of the intensity of that vision, and the strictness of that restraint, which made his poetry so severe a discipline. The poetry was made by isolation, the prose by his social life; yet they acted upon each other, and out of this conflict came a new and miraculous use of language, an exuberant, living language, of which this book is the latest example.



Commentary on Richard Ellman's The Identity of Yeats  
London Magazine, I, 11 (December 1954), 74-75

Watkins refused to review books by living authors, but he never objected to commenting on living authors in letters. This particular letter is remarkable only for its vitriolic tone and Watkins' rather petulant refusal to see Ellman's point about the change of conjunction.

A Letter to The London Magazine Concerning Richard Ellman's  
The Identity of Yeats

I opened the pages of Richard Ellman's The Identity of Yeats with the excitement which any unpublished material of the poet is bound to arouse. I was not disappointed. The poems quoted here which have not appeared in Yeats's collections, and the early workings of well-known poems, are, as Professor Day Lewis says in his review, of extraordinary interest. Mr. Ellman is also able to provide the circumstantial evidence of many works. He tells us what Yeats was doing before and after the poems were written, he gives us the dates of composition of most of the poems, and supplies many references of biographical interest in the notes.

Nevertheless Mr. Ellman's analysis, which is so fascinating when it relates to the poet's life, fails when he comes to the poetry. It fails because it is not balanced by a feeling for what cannot be analysed, which is in lyric poetry the element that gives permanence and unity. In biography he may be trusted, but when he brings his judgment to individual poems he betrays a triteness of observation which it would be difficult to rival. In his analysis of diction in the chapter on Style there are as many laughs as in an early Chaplin, but it is all handed out in dead seriousness. It is bad enough not to know what is an inversion and what is not, but in this book even short words like 'that' and 'but' acquire a foreign status. In a note on The Wild Swans at Coole we are told that in its earlier form Yeats had written the last verse before the fourth which preceeds it, and that in rewriting he changed the order of the verses but forgot to alter the word 'But' at the beginning

of the last verse. Here are the verses:

Unwearied still, lover by lover,  
 They paddle in the cold,  
 Companiable streams or climb the air;  
 Their hearts have not grown old;  
 Passion or conquest, wander where they will,  
 Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water  
 Mysterious, beautiful;  
 Among what rushes will they build,  
 By what lake's edge or pool  
 Delight men's eyes where I awake some day  
 To find they have flown away?

It would be interesting to know what word Mr. Ellman, or anyone in the world for that matter, would prefer to 'But' in that particular context.

In comparing two versions of an earlier poem of Yeats Mr. Ellman says that the later version demands less indulgence from the reader than the earlier. This book, valuable though it is for what it has brought to light, demands more indulgence than any reader with an ear for poetry can afford to give. The accident which makes a poem permanent, 'the luck' as Yeats called it, is something of which Mr. Ellman takes little account. One is reminded in closing the book how much more a work of art, which is continually creating its own silence, can tell us than the voice of the guide.

"Prose Writings by Dylan Thomas"  
Times Literary Supplement, LIV, 2788 (August 5, 1955), 446

Unlike the review of Quite Early One Morning, this very perceptive review of A Prospect of the Sea is an exercise of Watkins' critical powers rather than a joyous acclamation of Thomas' prose style. Watkins says here that Thomas used no surrealistic images in his poetry; he later concluded that there is one, the image of dried leaves in "After the Funeral."

Watkins comments further on several of the pieces mentioned in this review in the Foreword to Adventures in the Skin Trade and in the introduction and notes to Dylan Thomas' Letters to Vernon Watkins.

1955

Prose Writings by Dylan Thomas  
(A Review of A Prospect of the Sea)

This is the second book of prose writings by Dylan Thomas to appear in this country since his death. The first, Quite Early One Morning, published last autumn, contained the inimitable broadcast scripts and constituted an act of genius whose variety, exuberance and skill he alone could command. The present collection of fifteen stories and essays, chosen by the author for this book and edited by Dr. Daniel Jones, has an entirely different interest. The book is divided into two parts, the first part, occupying more than two-thirds of its length, consisting of eleven stories written in a style which he did not use after his twenty-fourth year. All these early stories were written between 1934, when his first book, Eighteen Poems, was published, and 1938; and seven of them were collected to form the prose section of his third book, The Map of Love, which is now out of print. These four years were intensely active ones for the poet. He used them to exercise and explore his imaginative powers, and to curb, so far as he could, their volcanic force, while his life moved from adolescence to maturity. The poems of The Map of Love testify to his triumph in that struggle, while the stories reveal the same imagination, but also the dust and heat. They are often directly linked with the poems, particular phrases being common to both. They have, then, a particular significance as the quarry from which certain elements of the poems were drawn.

The finest of these early pieces, "A Prospect of the Sea," was

not printed in The Map of Love. It has moments of great beauty. It tells the story of a boy meeting in a field a gypsy girl who frightens and attracts him. He finds that she is able to change the whole of the landscape, perhaps the whole of history, by the power she holds over his perceptions. Her eyes and hair change colour while he looks at her; she alternates between a simple country girl and a creature of legendary strangeness, and the country changes with her. Finally she runs from him, and after a vain chase he loses her in the sea:

He cried again, but she had mingled with the people moving in and out. Their tides were drawn by a grave moon that never lost an arc. Their long, sea gestures were deliberate, the flat hands beckoning, the heads uplifted, the eyes in the mask faces set in one direction. Oh, where was she now in the sea? Among the white, walking, and the coral-eyed. "Come back! Come back! Darling, run out of the sea." Among the processional waves. The bell in her breast was ringing over the sand.

The boy looks across the sea while voices and echoes ring in his ears. He is confronted with a Biblical vision:

On a hill to the horizon stood an old man building a boat, and the light that slanted from the sea cast the holy mountain of a shadow over the three-storied decks and the Eastern timber. And through the sky, out of the beds and gardens, down the white precipice built of feathers, the loud combs and mounds, from the caves in the hill, the cloudy shapes of birds and beasts and insects drifted into the hewn door. A dove with a green petal followed in the raven's flight. Cool rain began to fall.

In other stories of this period there is a surrealist element which never really enters the poems. It is found in "The Lemon" and in the sequence entitled "The Mouse and the Woman," and it shows how Dylan Thomas, who was no surrealist, recognized that the extreme and the odd were closer to reality than the literarily imitative and the staid. His real quarrel with these stories lay, however, very much deeper. The volume of language oppressed him, each new

story vying with the last in power, and he felt himself moving from the category of ambition into the category of reticence, and impelled to write about living people. The last of these early pieces, "In the Direction of the Beginning," is really a fragment, which was intended to be the beginning of a much longer story. It is not only closer to poetry than anything else in the book, it is also closer to actual poems. The title itself recalls the ending of the last poem in The Map of Love written for his twenty-fourth birthday, and other parts are related to the second poem of that book, and to "The Ballad of the Long-legged Bait," published in Deaths and Entrances, which he had begun to write at that time:

Whose was the image in the wind, the print on the cliff,  
 the echo knocking to be answered? She was orioled and serpent-  
 haired. She moved in the swallowing, salty field, the chronicle  
 and the rocks, the dark anatomies, the anchored sea itself.  
 She raged in the mule's womb. She faltered in the galloping  
 dynasty.

The transition fragment to "Conversation about Christmas," which opens the second part of the book, could not be more abrupt. The change of style is complete. The image-groping pencil has been laid down. All the self-consciousness has gone. The abstract pattern is replaced by living people; the cadence is the cadence of the living voice. This first of the four later pieces is really an extended statement of the broadcast talk, "Memories of Christmas," printed in Quite Early One Morning, written as a dialogue between the author and a small boy. The second, a satirical essay on "How to Be a Poet," is an extremely funny glossary of all that Dylan Thomas disliked, a digest, complete with parodies, of his antipathies.

The third and fourth are stories of his childhood, dated 1951 and 1953. Both are excellent, and the last, which was the only story he read on television, is a further proof that nobody since Dickens has been able to write in this way, with the incomparable invention, the accurate yet bubbling word-play, that springs from life itself.



"Introduction to an Exhibition of Paintings by the 56 Group"  
 Delivered in Swansea on the first day of the exhibition

Watkins was a witty man, his humour dry, double-edged, and subtle. He had a gift for recounting actual events in such a way as to make the ordinary seem fantastic, the extraordinary commonplace. When speaking of his boyhood, he once remarked: "I found a set of instructions about lifesaving, I was determined to save someone. But I misunderstood them, they may have been in German, and I thought the first necessary step was to cut off the drowning person's thumb...I stalked the cliffs with my penknife, looking for victims." In the course of a passionate defense of Dylan Thomas' way of life, he once broke off to say: "Did you hear about Lady Rhondda? She went down the funnel of the Lusitania. But she came back up again, she was a very determined woman, really."

Yet there is a sense in which Watkins was humourless. As some of his more dramatic poems show, he did not have a sense of the ridiculous, and could not always tell bombast from intense feeling. For him, writing comedy was very good, but not, in the last analysis, serious or meaningful. In some ways he remained a dour Welsh Nonconformist.

This delightful little series of puns on the artists' names was one of the few humorous pieces he kept among his manuscripts, which indicates that he may have published it or worked it into a comic poem. When asked why he did not publish his comic verse, especially a nursery rhyme about an anthropomorphic vacuum cleaner and a ballad with the refrain "I hate Benvenuto Cellini," he would say: "I'll not take my sense of humour on a leash."

Introduction to an Exhibition of Paintings by  
the 56 Group

This is a Fairley comprehensive exhibition. So boldly  
(Zobole)  
I Hunter ound for something to say about it, before you Steele  
yourselves to look at the pictures. The artists have done their  
job, and what Wright have I to Tinker with it? I'm shaking like  
a Giardelli as it is. What with a Koppel at the Malthouse, I'm  
like a fish out of water.

Now, you other fish, look at these attractive Bates. Snap  
them up. Will Roberts be yours, or which?

It muSt even seem that I can't talk properly, but I know  
them all, and they're all here. I declare the exhibition open.

Dylan Thomas in America  
Encounter, VI, 6 (June 1956), 77-79

By the time John Malcolm Brinnin's partial biography Dylan Thomas in America was released, the nonsensical uproar over Thomas' death had already been raging three years. Brinnin gave it fresh momentum, and added weight to the until-then mainly unsupported theory that Thomas had committed a kind of alcoholic suicide. Vernon Watkins had held back, amazed, from the turmoil and mourned his friend; but when the May 1956 issue of Encounter, a journal Watkins liked, took the stand that Thomas' death was self-inflicted, he decided to make a general statement, using Brinnin's book as the occasion. "The true tragedy of Dylan Thomas' death is that he died": only Watkins seemed to be concerned for the passing of a human soul. His deeply religious nature was particularly horrified at the allegations of suicide.

Watkins would have been very surprised at the reaction to his death, too, for many of the newspapers that ran lengthy obituaries, including The Times, The Guardian, the Western Mail, and the Seattle and Swansea papers adopted a blatant or veiled attitude of America-is-fatal-to-Welsh-poets and compared his death to Thomas'. None of them mentioned the possibility of suicide, Watkins' life never having been of interest to his readers, but it is more likely in his case than in Thomas'.

It is interesting that Watkins understood so well his friend's use of masks to preserve his imagination, for he had a set of them himself: seer, churchgoer, dutiful son, bank clerk, professor. And, like Thomas, he adopted the first one (the fragile poet pose) while still in his teens.

1956

Dylan Thomas in America  
(A Letter to Encounter)

I was recently sent John Malcolm Brinnin's book, Dylan Thomas in America, for review, but declined, because I do not review books by living authors. Had I undertaken the task I would have been bound to condemn the book in which I recognise two positive values only, the quoted words and judgments of Dylan Thomas himself, and the narration, in the last chapter, of the circumstances which led to his death. Mr. Hilary Corke, in his notice of the book in the May Encounter, prophesies an endless struggle between future protagonists who will try to interpret his death in their own terms. He rightly emphasises the significance of the subject of their dispute, and the conclusion he draws that this death is a test for every artist's conscience is true indeed. Yet his own verdict is surely the least acceptable of all. To call that death a self-inflicted one by any standards, particularly by moral ones, is to accept the materials of this book as spiritual evidence, the superficial tone in which it is written as a tone of authority, and the calculated observation as a record of insight. Nothing could be more misleading. The tone of the book and its materials betray at once the hallmark of a superficial acquaintance, prime evidence that its author did not know the man.

The true tragedy of Dylan Thomas's death is that he died. Every other consideration is secondary to that. His tours of America may be regarded as a progress towards an inevitable

destruction, but that view was contradicted in my experience by his healthy and vigorous appearance when he returned from them. The difference between the last tour and the earlier ones is that when he embarked on it he was already seriously ill. He knew this, and but for his financial straits it is fairly certain that he would not have gone. When it was almost too late, when he was dying, a telephone call was put through to St. Vincent's Hospital from Swansea, giving as much information as possible to assist a diagnosis; it was sent by his friend Daniel Jones, in whose house I waited for a reply. We were told that his life was in the balance. In two days he was dead.

Dylan Thomas spoke of this last tour as a necessity. It was the only one he approached with reluctance. Yet he did look forward, when the period of intensive work in New York would be over, to working with Stravinsky. His intention was to complete the script of Under Milk Wood, on which he continued to make revisions, and to handle the performances in New York; and then to go on to Hollywood where he would work with Stravinsky on their projected opera. He was, when he left England, in the position of a man who had several difficult hurdles to negotiate before reaching his objective. Had he been well, he would have done this easily. As it was, he hoped that the short blackouts he had occasionally suffered during the previous months would not recur. The project of the opera filled him with enthusiasm. He had sketched out a plan of the libretto in his mind, and he had the greatest regard for Stravinsky. He knew that he ought to see a doctor, but he feared that the doctor would pronounce him unfit and cancel the trip.

The tragedy of Dylan Thomas's death is made more bitter by the banality of judgment to which it gives rise. Those who were magnetised by his power to entertain became the victims of a mutually enacted delusion. The poet, simple, unaffected, and true, was a person rarely seen by his audience. Their dramatic spotlight at once changed him into what they desired. His stories, his wisecracks, they remembered, as who would not? but the surprising consistency of his judgments is one thing they never seem to have observed. In America his audiences recognised the superb reader of poetry certainly, but of the poet himself they knew nothing, or at least that is the impression left by this book. It might almost be said that he was killed by his own mask, by the grimace which his entertainment produced, by a kind of disgust at the popularity of what he was not.

To anyone who grasps this tragedy, whose final scene is horribly accelerated like a nightmare of misinterpretations on many levels, can anything be more cheap, tawdry, and irrelevant than the carefully rendered account of everything the poet ate, or didn't eat, and drank? The poet of apparently destructive force was certainly the most ethical, the most constant, of companions. He did not believe there was such a thing as a comfortable conscience. Where he found that the people around him were becoming puppets of self-satisfaction he did frequently break up the ground on which they stood. Such moods of violent exasperation coloured the false impression of a romantic poet rather than a true apprehension of the ethical witness. For a witness he always was, and the severest witness of his own behaviour. Yet he was also fundamentally sociable

and sympathetic. He tried to adapt his behaviour to his company. Considering each person to be an entire world, he was willing to go a long way with any man in his imagination to explore that world, but a world where Mammon took the place of God never failed to bore and disgust him. His instinct in conversation was to give, and to give prodigiously, and it was also to draw out ideas, to expose fallacies.

During the war, as at any other time, Dylan Thomas expressed his opinions directly and with courage, and he often suffered physical violence for his courage. He knew that human nature would not change and that false values could not be substituted for true ones. The minor violence and quarrels depicted in this book have really no significance, or even interest, compared with the quiet passages when they occur. The real expression of his situation had already been stated in his poems, and its violent climax anticipated:

The voice of children says  
 From a lost wilderness  
 There was calm to be done in his safe unrest,  
 When hindering man hurt  
 Man, animal, or bird  
 We hid our fears in that murdering breath,  
 Silence, silence, to do, when earth grew loud  
 In lairs and asylums of the tremendous shout.

and this:

I know the legend  
 Of Adam and Eve is never for a second  
 Silent in my service  
 Over the dead infants  
 Over the one  
 Child who was priest and servants,  
 Word, singers and tongue  
 In the cinder of the little skull,  
 Who was the serpent's  
 Night fall and the fruit like a sun,  
 Man and woman undone,

Beginning crumbled back to darkness  
Bare as the nurseries  
Of the garden of wilderness.

The strictness of Dylan Thomas's poetry in a life of apparent disorder has puzzled many; if the testimony of Brinnin's book were the sole evidence it would seem incomprehensible. The book is, however, a total misrepresentation. It attempts to say everything, and ends by saying nothing, the reason being that Dylan Thomas's actions and words are misunderstood on every page. When he said he was a Puritan he was not believed; but it really was true. Had he followed this statement by saying that before leaving for America on this last tour he had written for a diet-sheet and, though only drinking moderately, had attempted to give up drinking altogether, no one would have believed him. Yet this also was true, though the motive was far from puritanical. He wanted, and needed, his health. He would never have become a teetotaler; he hated all dogma, and that would have been the last for him to accept. But he was not an alcoholic, either. Beer was to him a necessary social medium; spirits were not. The difference between the habitual medium of American hospitality and the medium to which he was chiefly accustomed here undoubtedly hastened his death. The accident that he arrived in America just before his thirty-ninth birthday may have assisted that very instinct of generosity which was to prove fatal to him. Birthdays were always for him occasions for reflection--some of his finest poems were suggested by them--and for unstinted celebration. It would be appropriate, perhaps, for some people to regard his record-breaking bout of spirit-drinking just before his death as a climax, a



vindication of art against the world. Yet nothing is further from the truth. Those who treasure such a conception of the artist are likely to misunderstand any artist, but particularly this one. It is their picture that is emasculated, not he; and it is to their picture that he has succumbed. His death is the death they would expect of such an artist, but his death is also, on other terms, his own death; and therein lies the tragedy.

A minor surprise of Brinnin's book is the almost complete absence from its pages of the people about whom Dylan Thomas was most eloquent when he returned from the tours. His enthusiasm for certain poets whose names hardly occur in the narrative had made the tours worth while. Everyone who reads this book should know that at least one other book, even on this subject, has been left out. His widow's introduction is sufficient to put all readers on their guard. The only firm ground I recognize in the book is that upon which actual poems rest; by a feat of apparent magic the titles of the poems he read and loved do not change.

That it is never possible to explain a poet's life is an axiom of the imagination; and it is difficult enough to expound it. Under the most favourable circumstances only a partial exposition may be achieved; how much less, on the slender foundation of a late, business-guided, encounter. In this narrative one is aware continually of a deceived photographer necessarily preparing the artificial pose. He sells to the world a picture, or pictures, of a person who does not exist.

The poetry of Dylan Thomas and his late prose will remain his best interpreter. To the professional interrogator the task of

meeting him involved the removal of many masks. He himself was stubborn, dogged and constant, fiery, combative, full of wonder, self-critical, compassionate, generous, trusting simplicity through every complexity of mind, sociable, delighting in company, absorbed in all the mystery and extension of immediate experience. He was also sardonic and extremely witty, and out of a native honesty drew, at any desired moment, enough extravagance to illustrate his own myth. Even when the myth possessed him he remained true to the values of his imagination. Never having compromised, he had everything to live for when he died.

"In Memoriam: Roy Campbell"  
Poetry Book Society Bulletin, May 1957, 2.

Watkins had many friendships which had begun on the level of literary acquaintances. He demanded loyalty and commitment of his friends, and Roy Campbell, a man of rapid decisions, preferred to commit himself as soon as possible; he was not a patient man. It is likely that Watkins and Campbell became friends out of respect for each other's uniqueness, and discovered later their numerous agreements. These men, so very different in all readily apparent ways, shared a love of tradition, a deeply religious sense, and a wide knowledge of European literature. It is obvious from this note that Watkins respected Campbell; the extent to which Campbell returned this respect can be judged by the fact that the boisterous, flamboyant South African deliberately toned himself down in the presence of his shy, nervous Welsh friend. One result of this, of course, was that Watkins for a time could not believe the stories about Campbell's drinking bouts with Dylan Thomas and other frolics.

1957

## In Memoriam: Roy Campbell

I feel our Bulletin would be incomplete without noticing the sudden and tragic death of Roy Campbell in a motoring accident in Portugal. This loss to English poetry cannot be replaced. The contemporary poetic stage is now robbed of its most adventurous and flamboyant figure. Ever since 1924, when he burst upon that stage, he maintained a singularly consistent role as inspired campaigner and champion of the under-dog, the ranker. Endowed with courage and great physical strength, he was able to perform feats which Byron would have envied, while his verse, like Byron's, carried the force and decisive edge of the man of action. The figure on the stage, who had cast himself so young for so romantic and heroic a part, was hardly more remarkable than the man in the wings: himself talking with frankness and a disarming modesty in those intervals between episodes of aggressive action, and devoting himself with humility to his art and to his friends.

A firm friend, he was unswervingly loyal to his enemies, with whom he felt a communion like that a hunter feels with his prey. Dictatorship he despised as much as he loved tradition. Among his enemies those whom he alienated politically were the most deceived, for politics were not an integral part of Roy Campbell's consciousness. He looked for an heroic world, and in poetry for all that was heroic and divine in the imagination. When he did not find it he protested violently. He was bound to make sacrifices to his own myth.

Poetically Roy Campbell was the very opposite of Rilke; or it

is perhaps truer to say that his type of courage was the very opposite of the type Rilke possessed. The one was active, positive, crusading; the other passive, receptive, enduring. Rilke did not recognize enemies, but to Roy Campbell, who saw everything as black or white, they were as dramatically necessary as the dragon was to Saint George. He was conscious, not only of an extreme poetic loneliness, but of an urgent sense of duty and of a need to daunt that Chimaera which represented to him the hesitant and the false.

Though born in South Africa, Roy Campbell was in the truest sense a European poet. His favorite country was Spain, which he knew better than any other. A friend of Lorca, he translated his plays and some of his poems; he told me that it was at the request of Lorca's parents that he decided to edit his works. His translations from Baudelaire and Rimbaud were, like those from Lorca, marked by his own accent, for his poetic idiom was too characteristic to be lost in translation. Whether he translated from French, Spanish or Portuguese, he brought his own masculine equipment to the service of works of whose subtlety he was acutely aware. When he sacrificed subtlety for force the choice was his own, and deliberately made. He had the keenest appreciation of what was magical and untranslatable in poetry, as he showed when he talked about Lorca's Canciones and the Poems of Gongora. He described the mastery and lyric perfection of Gongora as incomparable.

His translations from Saint John of the Cross, perhaps the finest he made, reveal an affinity of craftsmanship and of religious fervor which many who knew him only superficially might not have suspected. Accomplished though he was in the many fields of

physical energy, he set the highest achievements of active life below the attainment of religious experience. Yet to the very end of his life both were linked in his imagination. His bull-fighting, his horsemanship, and the part he took in the Spanish civil war, were inextricably linked in the pattern of his life. A postcard showing the Alcazar arrived from Toledo four days before his death, bearing these words: "I am having a wonderful time in this heavenly place which means more than all the world to me, because it was here that the Devil was routed in 1936--as never before or since."

## An Exchange of Letters between Stephen Spender and Vernon Watkins

In the Observer of November 24, 1957, Stephen Spender suggested in a review of Letters to Vernon Watkins that the relationship of Watkins to Thomas was that of saint to scrounger. Watkins replied the following week:

I would like to disabuse your readers of an error which has crept into a number of notices of Dylan Thomas' letters to me, including that of your own reviewer, Mr. Stephen Spender. To suggest that Dylan Thomas was anything but the most generous of men would be a profound mistake. It is true that the letters contain a few passages about borrowing money, but the amounts lent were so negligible and were repaid so many times over in gifts of books that I find any suggestion that he was ever in my debt acutely embarrassing.

In compiling the book of letters I decided to leave out as little as possible. Not everyone believes, as I do, that everything is interesting which is written by a writer of genius, and I foresaw that lop-sided comment might be made on these small items of borrowing, but I left them in. In their time and context they were significant, mattering so much to him and not at all to me.

\* \* \* \* \*

Spender replied that Watkins talked in cliches, and asked if he would approve of the professor who discovered and published all Housman's deletions in his notebooks. Watkins replied, on December 15:

In his letter about Dylan Thomas Mr. Stephen Spender refers to my words "the most generous of men" as a sad cliché. I would myself have called them a happy one. Sadder is, I think, the avoidance of clichés when they happen to be true.

I do not retract my statement that "everything is interesting which is written by a writer of genius." . Wherever a manuscript by such a writer is exhibited, however trivial the manuscript, there is interest. What should or should not be published is a different question: that is determined by the writer's own wishes. I regard the publication after his death of A. E. Housman's deletions, which was contrary to his wishes, as deplorable and immoral. I do not think that Dylan Thomas, a poet as unlike A. E. Housman as possible, would find anything in my book of his letters to which he would object.



"Afterword" to Adventures in the Skin Trade by Dylan Thomas  
New York: New American Library ("Signet"), 1960, 184-190

Further information about the development of Adventures in the Skin Trade can be found in Letters to Vernon Watkins.

Watkins recognizes here what he had refused to admit in the letter concerning Dylan Thomas in America, that a destructive, and self-destructive, element existed in Thomas' character, but he applies it only to the writing, not the man. He, too, had a "heckler," a tendency towards self-dissention, and it had the same effect as on Thomas: it resulted in the need to revise over and over, and to risk killing the poem. Yet their methods of composition were different: "Dylan had a much closer relationship with language than I did; I was always closer to cadence. I mean, Dylan would prefer the right words in an imperfect cadence, where I would prefer the correct cadence even if the words weren't quite right."

1960

Afterword to Adventures in the Skin Trade

In a writer of great originality there is sometimes a heckler closer to him than his admirers, a dissenter who will not keep step with his fame, a spur which contradicts progress. Such a writer was Dylan Thomas. He began as a single performer. He created his own audience. Being very intelligent and witty, he could judge their reactions several years before the applause came. When it came he had already lost interest in his self-created audience, and found his true audience outside, in a sceptical world. His imagination kept a perverse integrity, resisting all favours. A religious poet, he sought the company of unbelievers. His ivory tower existed in the act of writing itself. Before and after the act, he challenged it with every hostile and contradictory element, and it remained untouched.

To Dylan Thomas, the writing of poetry was the most exacting and, potentially, the most rewarding work in the world. He was, when I first met him at the age of twenty, completely absorbed in the mystery of language, in the latent power of words and the magic of their substitution. He had no political interest, no programme of social reform. It was the power of language itself which obsessed him, its ability to restate the great themes which haunted his imagination--the Book of Genesis, the creation of man, the Garden of Eden, the opening eyes of the suckling, the unfolding universe, and the closing eyes of the witness of the reciprocal vision of heaven and this world. With his first book, Eighteen Poems, he had

astonished the public by the use of an idiom which recurred throughout the poems and controlled these themes, as from a battery, by a concise and suggestive force. The idiom, new to English poetry, was unmistakable:

I see the boys of summer in their ruin...

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower  
Drives my green age....

I sit and watch the worm beneath my nail  
Wearing the quick away....

A candle in the thighs  
Warms youth and seed and burns the seeds of age....

The writing of poetry, which was so exacting to Dylan already, but which became more and more exacting with each year of his life, was by no means his only activity. This would have been impossible. The intensity of this activity could not be evoked and sustained at will. Even when he was writing the early poems, whose composition was so much more frequent and consecutive than the late, he was writing prose, too, particularly stories. These early stories, though less permanent than the poems, display the same sexual preoccupation, the same adolescent groping, through tactile images, from darkness to light, the same pressing, through a multitude of symbols and observations, both imagined and real, towards a place and a condition as familiar and truthful as a field, on which the work of his maturity would rest. Many combine the theme of awakening love with an acute sense of the proximity of death. There is also an element of distrust in the act of creation. The writing of the story, the very pencil with which it is written, becomes a symbol of exaltation and of destruction. In the story "The Orchards," the pencil is described in the act of making a poem:

The word is too much with us. He raised his pencil so that its shadow fell, a tower of wood and lead, on the clean paper; he fingered the pencil tower, the half-moon of his thumb-nail rising and setting behind the leaden spire. The tower fell, down fell the city of words, the walls of a poem, the symmetrical letters...

There was, then, in 1935, when "The Orchards" was written, a close link between story and poem, as though the prose, although it contained surrealist elements which did not appear in the poetry, were the reverse side of the same coin. For these words about the pencil are autobiographical: they are clearly Dylan Thomas' own words defining his own imaginative situation at the time, a writer distrusting, not himself, but himself as a writer. So, beneath the dominant activity of his poetry and the subordinate activity of his prose, there was a third activity: distrusting both.

I have indicated already that Dylan Thomas, far from flattering himself, always opposed himself, and, with a modesty that really concealed a stubborn sureness, remained his own most severe critic and denigrator at every stage of his progress. He took very great pains, for he knew that if what he wrote was authentic and alive it would not be affected by either hostile criticism or the climate of approval. His finished work did, however, influence his creative and destructive judgment. As he wrote to me in a letter: "I build a flying tower and I pull it down." He was continually remaking himself in his poems, assailing his own established position lest it should hinder or obstruct the vision when the ground was broken for a new poem and he must start afresh.

In the prose, too, there came recurrent moments of severe

self-appraisal, moments when what had seemed a masterpiece at the time of writing appeared in retrospect to be only a tour de force. The highly charged language of the symbolic stories reached its climax in what was to be his most ambitious story, the opening of which he left as a fragment--"In the Direction of the Beginning." He told me after this that he would never again write a story of that kind, and at the same time his verse underwent a profound change, not exactly of language but of approach. The change was, I think, heralded by the little poem which begins

Once it was the colour of saying  
Soaked my table the uglier side of a hill...

soon followed by the line:

The gentle seaslides of saying I must undo...

This, and the other poems of The Map of Love, showed that, while he had now resolved to write only stories about real people, his poetry had also moved in the direction of the living voice. The poem he wrote for his twenty-fourth birthday, which is the last poem in The Map of Love, announced the work of his maturity even more clearly:

Dressed to die, the sensual strut began,  
With my red veins full of money,  
In the final direction of the elementary town  
I advance for as long as forever is.

In this development, which was to lead to his richest and deepest poetry, the poems of his last nine years, and to the brilliant prose of the late scripts, Dylan Thomas' novel "Adventures in the Skin Trade," of which he only wrote the first four chapters, plays a significant part. In the stories of Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog he released the spring of bubbling

life and comic invention which his friends had always known, though he had, until then, kept it out of his work. In "Adventures in the Skin Trade" the comic invention was directed against himself. He was a poet of tragic vision, but he was also a born clown, always falling naturally into situations which became ludicrous. Just as it is impossible to understand Lear without his Fool, it is impossible to have a complete picture of Dylan Thomas without the self-parody which appears in "Adventures in the Skin Trade." It is a key, not only to something instantly recognized in his personality, but to something afterwards recognized in his tragedy and early death.

A story about skins had been in Dylan's head for a long time, and I am now inclined to think that it had already been prodding his imagination two or three years before he began to write it. It was not unusual for Dylan to delay his compositions for an even longer period, and perhaps the first design for this story had suggested itself soon after the semiautobiographical events it describes.

It was not, however, until 1940 that Dylan repeatedly told me that he was thinking of writing a long story about skins. It was to be more ambitious than his other stories. It was to show what happened to a person, like himself, who took life as it came. This central character, Samuel Bennet, would attract adventures to himself by his own unadventurous stillness and natural acceptance of every situation. He would accept life, like a baby who had been given self-dependence. He would have no money, no possessions, no extra clothes, no civilized bias. And life would come to him.

People would come, and they would bring him life. Odd, very odd people would come. But whoever came, and whatever situation came, he would go on. He would keep his position, whether comic or tragic hero, whatever the plot. Then, at a certain point in time, he would look back and find that he had shed a skin.

In Dylan's first plan, so far as I can remember it, there were to be seven skins. There was to be a succession of scenes, each being an allegorical layer of life, and at the end of the story the character would be stripped of all illusion, naked at last. It would be in one way a journey through the Inferno of London, but it would also be a comedy. There is no doubt that, beneath the absurdity of situation which would provide furniture for the scenes, lay the influence and sense of tragedy of Webster's The Duchess of Malfi and Marlowe's Doctor Faustus. Had the novel been finished, it is unlikely that the comic central character of the first chapters would not have been revealed as also a tragic figure.

I remember Dylan reading me the first two chapters. He was still undecided about a title, and we discussed possible titles. "The Skins" was not quite right. "A Trader in Skins" or "A Traveller in Skins" might do. I left him undecided. Then, a few months later, he wrote from the big house near Chippenham where he was staying with John Davenport: "I play whist with musicians, & think about a story I want to call 'Adventures in the Skin Trade.'"

Towards the end of May, 1941, he was back in Laugharne Castle, and he wrote: "My prosebook's going well, but I dislike it. It's the only really dashed-off piece of work I remember doing. I've done 10,000 words already. It's indecent and trivial, sometimes

funny, sometimes mawkish, and always badly written which I do not mind so much." This was characteristic of Dylan's self-criticism; in the chorus of his admirers his was often the one dissenting voice.

A week later came a more amplified statement: "My novel blathers on. It's a mixture of Oliver Twist, Little Dorrit, Kafka, Beachcomber, and good old 3-adjectives-a-penny belly-churning Thomas, the Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive."

Not long after this I went down to Laugharne to stay with Dylan, and I was there when a London publisher's letter arrived, expressing disappointment in the opening chapters of the novel. It was not, ran the letter, the great, serious autobiographical work to which they had looked forward for so long. The manuscript would be returned, and it was hoped that he would offer them something autobiographical, but different, at a later date.

Dylan reread the letter with amused indignation. He was hard up, and a letter of acceptance would have been far more satisfactory. He protested to me that, whatever the publisher said, he thought the book entertaining, and he would not write any kind of solemn rhetoric in which he did not believe. At this time he used to write mainly in the afternoon, and after lunch he disappeared, and showed me a new part he had written when he emerged for tea. It covered about a page and was extremely funny. The rapidity with which he wrote this kind of prose and dialogue stood in sharp contrast to the composition of his poetry, for which he used separate work sheets and would spend sometimes several days on a single line, while the poem was built up, phrase by phrase, at glacierlike speed.



Each of the stories in Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog, with the exception of the last, was written in two or three weeks, but every long poem, though parts of it would come to him in a rush, always involved fifty or a hundred transcriptions and months of incessant toil.

Why, in view of his facility for writing comic prose, did Dylan not continue the novel beyond the first four chapters? Did he lose interest in it, or was there a deeper reason which restrained his hand? The first suggestion is contradicted by the fact that as late as June, 1953, he wrote in a letter to Oscar Williams that he would "begin to go on with Adventures in the Skin Trade." The heckler of his own success, the rebel against his own progress, still carried in his head the memory of his anti-Faust. Surely it was the intervening horror, the impact of war, particularly the London air raids, on his appalled and essentially tragic vision, that restrained him. Nothing less than the truth would now satisfy him. With his precise visionary memory he was able to reconstruct out of joy the truth of his childhood, both in his poems and in his late stories and broadcast scripts, for those experiences were real; but what was only half real, half fictional, he had to abandon.

Yet, like everything Dylan wrote, this intensely personal comedy was a part of him. This unique fragment, half fictional though it is, carries the unmistakable stamp of his personality. It is real now because it was once real to him, and because it holds the key to a certain attitude to the world and to a situation which was peculiarly his own. This attitude, which may be defined as a

rooted opposition to material progress, he continued to hold long after he had abandoned work on the novel. Its anarchic fantasy appealed to him, and it is one more example of the poet's indifference to reputation, of his refusal to follow the advance guard of his fame. Even twelve years after he had stopped writing it, he still thought of taking up the threads of the story he had taken so long to begin. Great though his reputation was, he could never become Emperor because he was also always the child who could see that he wore no clothes. Would he have continued the novel, had he lived? That is a question impossible to answer. He might have tried, but the unseen obstacle to his imagination remained. As it was, at the time that he stopped writing these pages, the pressure of the anarchy of war itself and the vision of distorted London had taken the place of his half fictional vision and compelled his imagination forward to "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" and to the beautiful poems evoking childhood, "Poem in October" and "Fern Hill." He could still go back to peace, but from there he could no longer go forward. The tunnel which led from his boyhood's home to unvisited London was shattered. Something had happened which prevented him from making the journey Samuel Bennet made, and which he himself had made ten years before.

"Poets on Poetry"  
X, I, 2 (March 1960), 153-154

This series of Blakean aphorisms sums up very well the themes of Watkins' last two volumes of poetry, Affinities and Fidelities. They are all meant literally.

## Poets on Poetry

Natural speech may be excellent, but who will remember it unless it is allied to something artificial, to a particular order of music?

Criticism projects its high tone, its flattering responses, but of what man-made echo does the mind not weary, as it turns endlessly round the Earth?

Ambition is wholly imitative and wholly competitive until it has died.

Unredeemed ambition is the desire to survive the present. Its direction is despair.

Redeemed ambition is the willingness to die rather than accept a survival alien to present truth. Its direction is compassion.

Religious poetry is sealed like the eyes of Lazarus by a refusal to be raised except by the true God.

The fountain, what is it? What is ancient, what is fresh. Defects of the imagination are always reflected in style. Vagueness is an enemy of holiness; the soul of harmony continually thirsts for definition.

The epic depends on exactness of detail: the larger the theme, the more minute its organization.

The syllable is the strictest instructor. For the lyric poet what better critic than silence?

A poet need have only one enemy: his reputation.

Write for the dead, if you will not disappoint the living.

The stammerer may arrive at the truth the fluent speaker

missed.

A true style cannot be learnt from contemporaries.

A fragmentary statement of truth is better than a polished falsification, for how could that live, even for a moment, beside what is eternally fresh?

What is revision except, in the interests of unity, to eliminate the evidence of words?

Suffering is a great teacher: we know nothing until we know that.

Lyrical poetry at its best is the physical body of what the imagination recognizes as truth.

The point of balance in a poem is unpredictable. Whatever weight a poet brings to it, beyond a certain point the poem writes itself.

Composition is spontaneous, but true spontaneity in poetry is nearly always a delayed thing. It is the check, the correction, the transfigured statement, that makes the poem unforgettable.

A poet, overhearing a conversation out of time, must be his time's interpreter; but how can the Muse know this, whose eyes are fixed on what is eternally fresh and continually beginning?

Critics, even unimportant ones, are bound to demonstrate their vitality, like sandhoppers.

The true critic, the true discoverer, stays in the same place.

A true poem renews itself at its close.

Art is miraculous. There is no destructive or restrictive theory of art which cannot be contradicted by a work of genius.

## "Swansea"

Texas Quarterly, IV, 4 (Winter 1961), 59-64

The years Watkins actually lived in Swansea proper were limited to his pre-school years and the first few of his marriage. To avoid living in town, he suffered every inconvenience and inflicted numerous indignities upon his family by living in a battered plywood hut prey to vile sea-winds, at the end of a boulder-strewn, bomb-pitted trail on the Gower, commuting every morning and evening on the erratic, swaying bus. He was aware that Swansea did not really survive its immolation of 1941:

Calm is the landscape when the storm has passed,  
Brighter the fields, and fresh with fallen rain.  
Where gales beat out new colours from the hills  
Rivers fly faster, and upon their banks  
Birds preen their wings, and irises revive.  
Not so the cities burnt alive with fire  
Of man's destruction; when their smoke is spent,  
No phoenix rises from the ruined walls.<sup>1</sup>

Watkins' devotion to this incredibly ugly town was really "fidelity to the fortunate dead," nostalgia for friends and places that were Swansea--particularly, as this essay shows, the Swansea of his youth.

<sup>1</sup>"Peace in the Welsh Hills," Cypress and Acacia, 30.

1961

## Swansea

I like to think of Swansea as a place with no sophistication, no cultural props, no reputation of any kind. A hidden place. Compressed as it is between the bay, which people have so often compared with the Bay of Naples, and its own seven hills, and urged from within by its so-called improvers, it has only with difficulty preserved its character. The levellers and planners have achieved much, but they have not overcome the stubborn oddity of the town. Nothing can take away the steep incline of Constitution Hill, with its rail to assist pedestrians to the top, where they can watch it swaying above the sea, balancing the residential streets on either side like a tightrope-walker. The grass of the Recreation Ground can never compete with the boots that play on it. Brynmill Park, offering the olive leaf to doves and foxes, still holds its collection of incongruous cages. Cwmdonkin Park is as it was when Dylan Thomas wrote his poem "The Hunchback in the Park," except that the reservoir is dry; it has changed little since I, too, played in it as a child. The lake of Singleton survives, undisturbed, the activities of builders. St. Helen's cricket ground is greener than ever. There are more policemen, but walls are still climbed, and although hoardings now hinder the spectators from the railway bridge, cricket matches are watched from houses with vulnerable windows, and the latest score seen from the tops of buses and carried round the coast.

Oysters have gone from the bay, as well as from Southend, between Oystermouth and the Mumbles Pier, where they used to be

packed high in barrels of seaweed. But at low tide, when the bay is a waste of wet mud, stakes and shreds of nets are still visible. The hill above the pier has been cut and its contour altered by progress and excavations, but the rock on which the lighthouse stands is the same as when Landor saw it, and so is the surrounding coastline, the one picture on which he longed to look when he was an exile in Italy.

Of the town's old shopping centre hardly a trace remains: it was burnt to the ground in the Air Raid of February 1941. When the old buildings were down and before the new were erected, the hills could be seen clearly from the centre, and there was room for an amphitheatre in the rubble. Where once was variegated congestion, after an empty interval of open ground, there is now uniform pressure, and the streets are more crowded than ever before. Much that we value is under the auctioneer's hammer. There is an open market that is about to close, a closed market that has just opened, a big theatre that is gone, and a little theatre that is coming again. The two old dredgers, the Flea and the Bug, rot in the dockyard, while Swansea assimilates and reproduces its violent yet identical changes, like the sea.

I do not miss the old Swansea any more than I miss the silent film. That is to say, I miss both a great deal. In spite of what I have said, something absolutely unreplaceable has gone. Swansea is a town that is always shedding a skin, that is always beginning. It is too near the sea to be academically stuffed and preserved. It cannot evoke the Past for its own sake; it can only evoke the Past in connection with what has changed and with an unpredictable



Present. So, when I pass a bank and see, not yet erased from the wall, the words UPLANDS CINEMA, I am made conscious, not only of the first world war when silent films were shown there, and particularly the Saturday afternoon serials featuring Pearl White, but of the second war, too, and of the creative elements which survived it.

I knew nothing of this when, at the age of eight and nine, I was a regular Saturday patron. There was then, outside the cinema, a brass railing which seemed to have been designed to keep the Saturday mob of children at bay, and over this we swarmed at two o'clock when the doors opened. Our excitement was great. Not for a week had there been any hope for the hero and heroine of our film. On the previous Saturday they had innocently fallen into the trap of the masked villain, deaf to our united cries, and had been finally shown, as the words TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK flashed on the screen, in a situation which offered no solution but death. Pearl White was the particular heroine of many of us; we were alarmed for her, but perhaps I was even more concerned than the rest, as I was more credulous. So, when we all rushed in, a majority audience of children, some of whom were regularly thrown out, even in the uproar I could not for a moment forget Pearl White, the American actress who really threw herself off bridges into rivers and risked her life in the making of the film. It was wartime, and in our mock street wars she became the centre of many fights and struggles.

I grew up out of her memory. Then, one day more than twenty years later, when the danger of a new war was coming nearer, I

suddenly saw on a newspaper poster the four words PEARL WHITE IS DEAD, and this prompted, soon afterwards, the poem which I had always owed her:

Who flung this world? What gangs proclaimed a truce,  
 Spinning the streets from bootlaces come loose?  
 What iron hoop in darkness slid  
 Chased by electric heels which hid  
 Cold faces behind pamphlets of the time?  
 Why was I left? What stairs had I to climb?

Four words catch hold. Dead exile, you would excite  
 In the red darkness, through the filtered light,  
 Our round, terrified eyes, when some  
 Demon of the rocks would come  
 And lock you in his house of moving walls:  
 You taught us first how loudly a pin falls.

From penny rows, when we began to spell,  
 We watched you, at the time when Arras fell,  
 Saw you, as in a death-ray seen,  
 Ride the real fear on a propped screen,  
 Where, through revolting brass and darkness' bands,  
 Gaping, we groped with unawakened hands.

A sea-swung murmur and a shout. Like shags  
 Under carved gods, with sweets in cone-shaped bags,  
 Tucked in to-morrow's unpaid fears,  
 Rucked there before the unguarded years,  
 We watched you, doomed, drowned, daggered, hurled from sight,  
 Fade from your clipped death in the tottering light.

Frantic, a blunted pattern showed you freed.  
 Week back to week I tread with nightmare speed,  
 Find the small entrance to large days,  
 Charging the chocolates from the trays,  
 Where, trailing or climbing the railing, we mobbed the dark  
 Of Pandemonium near Cwmdonkin Park.

Children return to mourn you. I retrace  
 Their steps to childhood's jealousies, a place  
 Of urchin hatred, shaken fists;  
 I drink the poison of the mists  
 To see you, a clear ghost before true day,  
 A girl, through wrestling clothes, caps flung in play.

From school's spiked railings, glass-topped, cat-walked walls,  
 From albums strewn, the streets' strange funerals,  
 We run to join the queue's coiled peel,  
 Tapering, storming the Bastille,  
 Tumbling, with collars strewn and scattered ties,  
 To thumbscrewed terror and the sea of eyes.

Night falls. The railing on which fast we pressed  
 Bears you, thumb-printed, to a death unguessed,  
 Before the time when you should rise  
 Venus to adolescent eyes,  
 A mermaid drying from your acid bath  
 Catching our lechery on a flying path.

Who has not seen the falling of a star?  
 Black liquorice made you bright before the War.  
 You glittered where the tongue was curled  
 Around the sweet fear of this world.  
 Doom's serial writing sprang upon the wall  
 Blind with a rush of light. We saw you fall.

How near, how far, how very faintly comes  
 Your tempest through a tambourine of crumbs,  
 Whose eye, by darkness sanctified,  
 Is brilliant with my boyhood's slide.  
 How silently at last the reel runs back  
 Through your three hundred deaths, now Death wears black.

That poem was printed in July 1939, in Life and Letters, just two months before the outbreak of the last war. Dylan Thomas had already left Swansea, and others were scattered when war came. I did not leave until the end of 1941, and by that time I was the last in Swansea of a circle of friends who had once met every week in the Kardomah in Castle Street, which was now a mass of rubble. Alfred Janes the painter, one of this group, whose studio, high above a flower shop near Swansea Station, could only be reached by climbing a stair which held every variety of smell from the flowers to the pickled objects he painted, fish, fruit and lobsters, would not return until 1946, and the studio had been destroyed in the blitz.

Before leaving, I had begun a long poem, dedicated to a child born in France in the chaos of Hitler's invasion. I was on the point of going to Paris with a present for her christening, as I was to be her godfather, when the news of Hitler's invasion came. I called this poem, which I was not to finish until the war ended, "The Broken Sea," and it was just before leaving Swansea in 1941

that I wrote the long section about Swansea and Paris which opens with these verses:

My lamp that was lit every night has burnt a hole in the shade.  
A seawave plunges. Listen. Below me crashes the bay.  
The rushing greedy water smothers the talk of the spade.  
Now, on the sixth of November, I remember the tenth of May.

I was going to fly to your christening to give you a cup.  
Here, like Anderson's tailor, I weave the invisible thread.  
The burnt-out clock of St. Mary's has come to a stop,  
And the hand still points to the figure that beckons the house-  
stoned dead.

Child Shades of my ignorant darkness, I mourn that moment alive  
Near the glow-lamped Eumenides' house, overlooking the ships in flight,  
Where Pearl White focussed our childhood, near the foot of Cwmdonkin  
Drive,  
To a figment of crime stampeding in the posters' windblown blight.

I regret the broken Past, its prompt and punctilious cares,  
All the villainies of the fire-and-brimstone-visited town.  
I miss the painter of limbo, at the top of the fragrant stairs,  
The extravagant hero of night, his iconoclastic frown.

My true regret was not that these things had gone, but that war had caused them to go. Dylan Thomas had gone, and gone, too, was his early iconoclasm. After leaving Swansea he had written a little poem of recollection, also about Cwmdonkin Park and his house and writing-table pitched on the steep hill beneath the reservoir, opposite a patch of level ground, grassy but irregular, where girls would come for hockey practice. They played at an angle to the hill while we read poems and talked in the bay window. The poem is a miracle of condensation, for he not only describes these things but announces the change in his style and attitude to life which was to bring about his greatest poetry; it is a Swansea poem, but it is already related to the poems he was beginning to write in Laugharne:

Once it was the colour of saying  
Soaked my table the uglier side of a hill

With a capsized field which a school sat still  
 And a black and white patch of girls grew playing;  
 The gentle seashores of saying I must undo  
 That all the charmingly drowned arise to cockcrow and kill.  
 When I whistled with mitching boys through a reservoir park  
 Where at night we stoned the cold and cuckoo  
 Lovers in the dirt of their leafy beds,  
 The shade of their trees was a word of many shades  
 And a lamp of lightning for the poor in the dark;  
 Now my saying shall be my undoing,  
 And every stone I wind off like a reel.

How else, but from the discarding of what is false in the Past,  
 can great art come? Art is composed of the constant and the elusive;  
 neither can thrive without the existence of the other. I like to  
 think of Swansea as the enemy of reputation, and as the nourisher  
 of artists who renew themselves. In the greatest artists, and par-  
 ticularly in the work of Ceri Richards, Swansea's most distinguished  
 painter, recollection is always turned to creative ends.

Here, finally, is my "Ode to Swansea":

Bright town, tossed by waves of time to a hill,  
 Leaning ark of the world, dense-windowed, perched  
 High on the slope of morning,  
 Taking fire from the kindling East:

Look where merchants, traders, and builders move  
 Through your streets, while above your chandler's walls  
 Herring gulls wheel, and pigeons,  
 Mocking man and the wheelwright's art.

Prouder cities rise through the haze of time,  
 Yet, unenvious, all men have found is here.  
 Here is the loitering marvel  
 Feeding artists with all they know.

There, where sunlight catches a passing sail,  
 Stretch your shell-brittle sands where children play,  
 Shielded from hammering dockyards  
 Launching strange, equatorial ships.

Would they know you, could the returning ships  
 Find the pictured bay of the port they left  
 Changed by a murmuration,  
 Stained by ores in a nighthawk's wing?

Yes. Through changes your myth seems anchored here.  
Staked in mud, the forsaken oyster beds  
Loom; and the Mumbles lighthouse  
Turns through gales like a seabird's egg.

Lundy sets the course of the painted ships.  
Fishers dropping nets off the Gower coast  
Watch them, where shag and cormorant  
Perch like shades on the limestone rocks.

You I know; yet who from a different land  
Truly finds the town of a native child  
Nurtured under a rainbow,  
Pitched at last on Mount Pleasant hill?

Stone-runged streets ascending to that crow's nest  
Swinging East and West over Swansea Bay  
Guard in their walls Cwmdonkin's  
Gates of light for a bell to close.

Praise, but do not disturb, heaven's dreaming man  
Not awakened yet from his sleep of wine.  
Pray, while the starry midnight  
Broods on Singleton's elms and swans.

"Behind the Fabulous Curtain"

Poetry Chicago, XCVIII (May 1961), 124-125

Watkins used this review of E. W. Tedlock's Dylan Thomas: The Legend and the Poet (London: William Heinemann, 1960) as an excuse for making a general statement about the inadvisability of making general statements about Dylan Thomas. The poem "Exegesis" later appeared in A Garland for Dylan Thomas, edited by George Firmage and Oscar Williams (New York: Clarke and Way, 1963) and Fidelities.

## Behind the Fabulous Curtain

(A Review of Dylan Thomas: The Legend and the Poet,  
edited by E. W. Tedlock)

It is difficult to explain to anyone who did not know Dylan Thomas why any study of him must remain totally inadequate. It is equally difficult to explain why those who knew him find themselves deeply handicapped in writing about him. The quality he prized most was seriousness, and he was a born clown; but was there any other poet of recent times who could create so quickly an intimacy of judgment, an apprehension of what was valid, in art and life? That is perhaps one of the reasons why strangers who met him only once for a long conversation felt, after his death, that they had known him all their lives. The entertainer and the intellectual alike were slightly ashamed after meeting him, as he could beat them both at their own game; but if they were humble they quickly recognized that he was humble, too. The prig was his bete noir, the pedant a black-and-white crossword figure whom he didn't despise.

The variety of life and its abundance sang in his veins. He was born to praise it, and he did so most completely when war distorted it into every manifestation of horror. When the war ended, his own war continued. He was, on the one hand, enriched by the heroic comedy of people's lives, for he loved people, and, on the other, fascinated by artificial pattern, for the problems of form he had to solve in his last poems were subtler and more intricate than any he had set himself before. He found freedom in the late broadcast scripts, but pattern obsessed him. In this late work the prose, with all its humorous invention, was made by his social life, the poetry by his isolation in spite of that, the isolation



of the entertainer who has taken off his mask.

A writer's mask can be fatal to him, and it is certain that the image the age demanded of Dylan Thomas was accelerated by his popularity. His infectious humour deceived everyone but himself. His method was not to retreat from the mask, but to advance beyond it, and in that exaggeration remain completely himself. He agreed readily with his detractors, and did not at all mind being misunderstood. Then, in the private dark, his exuberance was subjected to the strictest control. The public figure and the lyric poet whose work began and ended in the Garden of Eden came to terms, terms, which no critic or friend has the complete equipment to analyze.

#### EXEGESIS

So many voices  
 Instead of one.  
 Light, that is the driving force  
 Of song alone:  
 Give me this or darkness,  
 The man or his bone.

None shall replace him,  
 Only falsify  
 Light broken into colours,  
 The altered sky.  
 Hold back the bridle,  
 Or the truth will lie.

"Foreword" to A High Wind in Jamaica by Richard Hughes  
New York: New American Library ("Signet"), 1961, v-xi

Watkins' initial difficulty in finding his subject in this foreword is symptomatic of rapid composition as well as his usual tendency to write about Dylan Thomas whenever possible.

The visit described here took place about a month before Watkins met W. B. Yeats. Hughes, delivering himself of long monologues, was less cordial than Yeats would be.

Foreword to A High Wind in Jamaica by Richard Hughes

The small Welsh fishing town of Laugharne, west of the town of Carmarthen, has been made familiar to American readers by the writings of Dylan Thomas. It provides the scenery of what is perhaps his most perfect poem, Over Sir John's Hill, and it was in Laugharne that the greater part of Under Milk Wood and his last poems and prose pieces were written. So vivid is the aura surrounding this village at the edge of the waves, and so clear the definition of its inhabitants, whether winged, tail-coated or jerseyed (established by the imaginative idiom of Dylan Thomas), that it is difficult for those who do not know it to realize that the aura of Laugharne, and its unworldliness, were already present before Dylan went there. Yet it was this that decided him to live there soon after his marriage--this, and the presence of other writers, for soon after his arrival he wrote about Laugharne in a contributor's note to Life and Letters: "Its literary values are firmly established: Richard Hughes lives in a castle at the top of the hill; I live in a shed at the bottom."

Of the other writers who lived in or near Laugharne I saw nothing, but I well remember my first encounter with Richard Hughes. It occurred on a morning in 1938. On the previous day I had arrived by bus from Carmarthen to find Dylan's small house empty. It was six o'clock in the evening, and I went back to the bus to ask the conductor when the next bus from Carmarthen would come in. "Eight o'clock," he said. "And there's one at seven." Those were the first words I heard in Laugharne, the first statement of a theme that was repeated, with many variations, by different villagers, on my subse-

quent visits there. Dylan and Caitlin Thomas, who arrived by the second, earlier bus, very soon introduced me to a number of people who corrected, with everything they said, any conventional sense of time. When we went to the pub, nobody entered who conformed to that sense, and I slowly realized that the pub itself belonged to the same unconventional pattern.

It was not, however, until the following morning that we saw Richard Hughes. We had talked late, Dylan unfolding to me the mysteries of Laugharne and delighting in my initiation, until, exhausted, I had sunk into a sleep troubled only by nightmares of regularity and orderliness in which the villagers kept perfect step and checked their watches as the clock struck. The sun now lit up the newly painted room where we had breakfast, and we had just finished when there were two knocks on the door. "That will be Hughes," said Dylan. This visitation gave the surname an accent of awe.

If the awe of expectation was considerable, the awe of the presence was much greater. I saw in the doorway a figure tall and solemn, with a high, white forehead and black, curly beard, his powerful hands resting on a strong cane. On this he leaned in order not to dwarf still further the low doorway on whose threshold he stood. I was quickly introduced, and he moved with an evenness of step and intonation into the room, rising there almost to the rafters ceiling, and then standing stock still opposite the window, black-bearded and impressive, like a sea captain who had taken up a vantage point in a small boat, focussing, with an invisible telescope, on something none of us could see. His eye travelled from the white rafters round the walls of the room to the floor, and ours

followed until all our heads were inclined down. "I like your lilac-coloured beams," he said. Our eyes shot up incredulously to the roof that had seemed white. While he, too, studied them, he murmured, without changing his posture: "And I like the feet of your table."

This gymnastic interview, during which the controller of our muscles never moved, puzzled me. I had never before met a writer with so completely impassive a mask, and my first reaction was that he used this demeanour to curb Dylan's natural eagerness and enthusiasm. I was deceived. Only when I stayed at Laugharne Castle a little later did I begin to realize that the mask was used solely for Richard Hughes's own benefit, that it was his own exuberance and awareness that he was resisting and keeping under restraint. His acute observation of the barbaric world of children and of animal joy had manoeuvred him out of wonder, which was only bearable for minutes, into immobility. When a messenger from that world entered the room, the sea-pirate on land, the cypress with a sense of humour, showed an amused recognition, but he kept his serenity, his distance. I wondered indeed whether a moment of crisis, perhaps at sea, when death was imminent, could ever disturb that serenity; and I decided that it could not.

It is a mark of sensitivity in a writer to conceal his gifts. Those who enjoy being known as writers do not, on the whole, write so well as those who avoid being known as writers in order to write. Even the prolific great writers of the past whose names are so familiar belong to the second category; they were never blinded or halted in their undertakings by the advertisement of their published

books. Their feet continually trod virgin soil. Some were protected by the sheer speed of their invention, others by a dogged cunning, but each had to save his skin from the hounds of publicity by providing for himself some art of camouflage which, in the animal world, nature supplies. Richard Hughes had so completely mastered this art that he had run himself to a standstill, and then continued at a walking pace to Laugharne, leaving the chase and the kill far behind, and now resting his feet on the coloured pelt of his own adventures. In gentle cadences he talked gravely and most entertainingly of the past, the present, and the future, until each was becalmed by his understatement and the trance of his voice into a condition that conformed to the timelessness of Laugharne itself. No wonder he had come to the place, and he was now its Petty Constable. No air of adventure, no juvenile delinquency for him.

I breakfasted with his children, and they certainly belonged to A High Wind in Jamaica, that whirlwind of a book which he had written before any of them were born. I wondered whether they guessed that their world was the native country of his imagination, and that the sea, above which the walls of Laugharne Castle stood, was his true element. They must have begun to guess the second of these truths, for their father loved the sea and sailed as much as possible; but children observe everything except themselves. They take for granted that Eden of sensuous awareness and those violent reactions to a primitive world of sudden and inexplicable changes, charted in that book with such speed and precision. The disturbances of childhood are made more real there than any adult disturbances,

which dwindle into insignificance, as they do before the eyes of a child. Yet the moral climate above the pagan underfoot is a vague thing, provoking piety, but nothing else. In this, too, Richard Hughes remains true to childhood. It is impossible for an adult to be pious, where the object of his piety is vague.

The one element in A High Wind in Jamaica which belongs to adult life is its aesthetic beauty. This is something children commonly ignore. Their minds are too literal and too medieval for it, and the pieces of description which flash past like the wings of tropic butterflies or birds do not seriously interrupt the progress of the young adventurers who command the narrative.

Exeter Rocks is a famous place. A bay of the sea, almost a perfect semicircle, guarded by the reef: shelving white sands to span the few feet from the water to the undercut turf; and then, almost at the mid point, a jutting-out shelf of rocks right into deep water--fathoms deep. And a narrow fissure in the rocks, leading the water into a small pool, or miniature lagoon, right inside their bastion. There it was, safe from sharks or drowning, that the Fernandez children meant to soak themselves all day, like turtles in a crawl. The water of the bay was as smooth and immovable as basalt, yet clear as the finest gin: albeit the swell muttered a mile away on the reef. The water within the pool itself could not reasonably be smoother. No sea breeze thought of stirring. No bird trespassed on the inert air.

For a while they had not the energy to get into the water, but lay on their faces, looking down, down, down, at the sea-fans and sea-feathers, the scarlet-plumed barnacles and corals, the black and yellow schoolmistress-fish, the rainbow-fish--all that forest of ideal Christmas trees which is a tropical sea-bottom. Then they stood up, giddy and seeing black, and in a trice were floating suspended in water like drowned ones, only their noses above the surface, under the shadow of a rocky ledge.

These and other beautiful objects are to the children not beautiful at all, but rather imminent, being, like the shells the boy sees in one of Hofmannsthal's poems, too close to themselves in their spontaneity and in the perfection of their form, having

emerged so recently from the same world:

For long he did not think of shells as fair:  
He was too much out of one world with those.

The children are innocent, but they are also savages, and in their adventures they are closer to nature than to their parents. They represent a mutiny of the senses which no urban civilization can suppress. They are misunderstood, particularly by their mother, because they need to be. They are living in the Old Testament, before discovering the New.

Certain authors, Lewis Carroll, Walter de la Mare and Richard Hughes among them, have been specially endowed with the gift of re-perceiving the curious logic of childhood. Each of these three, in creating what he did, had to run the gauntlet between the sentimental and the whimsical on the hard, down-to-earth track of wonder which is a child's own. Each tackled the problem in a different way. Lewis Carroll allowed his sentimentality to play on the margin of the river bank, but never let it intrude on the narrative, the course of which was minutely and mathematically controlled. Walter de la Mare saw the world, even at eighty, through a child's eyes, but his vision was never blurred, because at no time in those years had he released his apprehension of the sinister and the macabre in nature. Richard Hughes, in A High Wind in Jamaica, used those two elements, which always fascinated him, and counterbalanced them by the saving grace of the ludicrous. He was not so completely a poet as Hans Anderson, who seized the province of childhood by his own clumsy innocence and an art of marvellous sophistication. Anderson wrote tragedies, Hughes comedies.

It may be questioned whether a satirical story of children's



adventures which first appeared in 1929, ten years before the Second World War, can retain its validity after so much has happened. If I were asked whether the book could be written now I should say No, but I should say it with regret. The properties of the book, which belong to the unfolding scenery of childhood, are real. The painting of those properties is brilliant. Richard Hughes is a master of description, whether he displays the activity of the senses of children or the depredation of the convulsive forces of nature:

Then it came. The water of the bay began to ebb away, as if someone had pulled up the plug: a foot or so of sand and coral gleamed for a moment new to the air: then back the sea rushed in miniature rollers which splashed right up to the foot of the palms. Mouthfuls of turf were torn away: and on the far side of the bay a small piece of cliff tumbled into the water: sand and twigs showered down, dew fell from the trees like diamonds: birds and beasts, their tongues at last loosed, screamed and bellowed: the ponies, though quite unalarmed, lifted up their heads and yelled.

Circumstances have changed, but children remain children, and Jamaica, with its extraordinary faculty for renewing its vegetation after a hurricane, is still there. So is the sea, with its indifference to history. The sharp, kaleidoscopic colours of the book have now a nostalgic charm, but they have also a real terror, for an ominous atmosphere hangs over them, as though at any moment the God of the Old Testament would strike again. Whatever happens, the deeper our understanding of human nature is, the less we are likely to be taken by surprise. Ibsen wrote a life history of each of his characters before beginning a play, for he knew that the behaviour of adults could not be understood without reference to hereditary traits and to their behaviour as children.

I remember that I visited Laugharne again on the very day that

war was declared, and I went there frequently in the following year. But by that time Richard Hughes had left for the Admiralty, where he served until the war ended, earning the O. B. E., which he was awarded in 1946. I missed him very much. I missed his unflinching courtesy and kindness, and the subtle, suggestive humour which punctuated his talk. I saw his wife Francis after he had gone, and she gave me news of him, but it would be twenty years before I saw him again. When I did, he struck me as being completely unchanged. It was a crowded gathering, and the tall, romantic adventurer, who had travelled down from his home in Portmeirion for the occasion, was discernible in the distance. When he drew nearer I recognized the voice I had heard since the war in broadcast talks of admirable intimacy and evocative power. I had last talked to him not long after the publication of In Hazard, the successor to A High Wind in Jamaica, on which he had spent nine years. I had read poems and stories, but I had not known then that he was the first writer of plays for radio. Now, gradually, as I went up to him, I saw that the speed of his imagination still wore the mask of immobility and still employed the slow, melodious accents of a purring top. Was North Wales indeed so dangerous? And why, in almost twenty years, had he printed nothing in book form except the volume on the Administration of War Production in the Official History of the War, which he wrote in collaboration with J. D. Scott? I hope that soon after this is printed my question will be obsolete. It is not a characteristic of the Welsh imagination to lie fallow long.

"W. B. Yeats--the Religious Poet"

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This essay, which Watkins regarded as his only major piece of prose, was originally written in French and read in that language to a British Council meeting in Paris in May of 1948. It was first printed, also in French, in Critique for November of 1953. It was also used in various lectures and readings.

The French version begins:

La difference entre la premiere maniere de Yeats et le style de son oeuvre ulterieure est certes remarquable, mais la parente entre ces deux manieres est bien plus remarquable encore. C'est la difference entre une main delicate mais dont le seul exercice a ete jusqu'alors d'evaluer des temps et la repartition des cadences et une main qui a appris a saisir et utiliser les outils les plus divers.

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## W. B. Yeats--The Religious Poet

The distinction between the early style of Yeats and the style of the later poetry is remarkable, but the affinity between them is more remarkable still. It is the distinction between a delicately formed hand which has not yet applied itself to any craft, except that of measuring distance and the distribution of cadences, and a hand which has learned to grip and master every kind of weapon. The first holds the palette to the imagination, but the second is its athletic body. The distinction is an aesthetic problem; it represents a physical revolution and an attempt to cast off what does not belong to the new body, a sensitive and painful progress from artificial poetic language to purity of diction, from circuitous apprehension to passionate expression; and standing in the midst of this progress is Ezra Pound, who was the chief influence in helping Yeats to mould his later style. Pound more than any other may be said to have helped Yeats to cut away unnecessary and vague words from his work. Yet, although Yeats acknowledged his debt to Pound and repudiated his earlier style, the affinity between the two styles remains. It is an affinity in the quality most personal to a poet: an affinity of cadence. The hand is stronger, but, in any example you may choose, it is the same hand.

The fact is that Yeats all his life had been looking for one thing, which he called "Unity of Being"; and he was still looking for this when he died. He had a restless imagination, and it was partly his habit of continual intellectual adventure that kept his poetry fresh. The development of his poetry, which was sustained

until the last week of his life, corresponded closely to the development of his character. In 1930 he made this casual note in a diary: "My character is so little myself that all my life it has thwarted me. It has affected my poems, my true self, no more than the character of a dance affects the movements of a dance." Yet it is impossible for us to be deceived. The poems reveal that his character has affected them profoundly. The early poems, which are pre-Raphaelite in style and imagery, were built upon themes of Irish myth or upon the restlessness of desire or unrequited love, and they show no association with family tradition. As he aged, his feeling for tradition deepened, and so did his bonds with friends. When some of those friends died, the poems he wrote about them were poems he could not have written in his youth, for in that time his poetry had undergone a purgation; it had been purified by tragedy. While much of his early poetry seems to strain for a release from conscience, every poem in the late work is a test of conscience. Every question between Self and Soul is prompted by the religious sense.

Yeats's habit of working and thinking was always analytical, and when, a few days after his marriage, his wife surprised him with messages she had written in automatic script, these messages excited him extremely, as they seemed to answer problems which he had set himself for years. They told, in philosophical terms and in diagrams, chiefly of gyres and cones, how man ran his course between two eternities, that of Race or Self, and that of Soul. Yeats decided to devote the remainder of his life to elucidating these messages; but further messages came, stating that the senders were only offering him "metaphors for his poetry." From these

messages Yeats elaborated his system of the "Phases of the Moon," and the results of his research into the fabric on which so many of the later poems are woven are published in his prose work, A Vision. Fortunately for his poetry, Yeats's constant humility of soul was never wholly caught up in the vast, eccentric speculations of this intricate work. The scaffolding of his ideas did not bother him, for he counted most on the moment of revelation and he always knew it was at hand.

Yeats as a craftsman laboured tirelessly; it is doubtful whether any other English lyric poet worked so hard at his revisions. Yet it was always upon the unforeseen that he relied, upon that unpredictable luck which is the reward of tenacity. "Poetry is plainly stubborn," he said; and he wrestled with it inexhaustibly, repeating the words aloud again and again, chanting and listening, listening and chanting, like William Blake in his poem "An Acre of Grass," who

beat upon the wall  
Till Truth obeyed his call.

In the late poems it is noticeable that the last line of the poem is nearly always unpredictable; it holds the moment of conscience, and in all the late work the moment determines the poem. It is the swiftness of light rather than thought; and the leap from the good work to the unalterable one may be seen in Yeats's revisions, and particularly when the final draft is compared with the first. Yet these were aural revisions, never made for the eye; the light is musically controlled. It is often found that most delicate revisions were made in words of different meaning but kindred sound ("Fire" became "Five" at the end of "Those Images"), as though the statement

had at first been imperfectly heard. The Muse of Ancient Greece is the closest approximation to Yeats's actual method. He did not believe there was a better way of writing poetry than by listening in absolute silence to the unpredictable voice.

In the late work every poem is a development of those that went before, yet each is an entirely new poem. We see the threads which have been used before, but they never before made this pattern. Sometimes the pattern is not completed until the last line, its effect delayed until even the last word, and is so changed by it that the whole is transfigured, and the end is then transfigured by those transfigured words. I can imagine Yeats writing those endings with his early, apprentice hand. It is the correction, in contradiction to that smooth, musical facility, that is so personal to the poet. This correction is so true and at once so recognizable, so personal to Yeats and to no other poet, that in the memory it becomes identified with his soul.

The works are made permanent by that correction: they can never fade. How much patience must have gone to the making of these poems, how much patience in waiting for the "luck," as he called it, for the unpredictable word, the unpredictable correction that is so personal to the poet, so much a part of his soul. Technical mastery had become instinctive, certainly, but technical mastery alone could give us good, perhaps even great, but not miraculous poems; and the miraculous element in all Yeats's poetry is evident even in the development of the late work from book to book, from The Tower through The Winding Stair to New Poems and Last Poems. Not only is there a dominant vocabulary in each book, a new set of recurring words emerging in each (and this is true

also of A Full Moon in March, which appeared between The Winding Stair and New Poems), but each is really an imaginative rebirth of the poet. As he said of his revisions: "It is myself that I remake"; and the last rebirth is the most impressive of all, since it contains all that went before, and transcends it. It is in keeping with the miraculous nature of Yeats's poetry that his most accomplished poems were written when he was over seventy. He was a better poet then than he had ever been before and he knew it.

Yeats did not rely for his poetry on knowledge; he relied on oracles. Just as his father, in a letter, said that he was himself always on the point of discovering the Primum Mobile of the universe, so Yeats at every moment was conscious of the distillation of knowledge in oracles, oracles which could, when he most needed it, give him "Unity of Being."

An oracle depends upon a duality of All and Nothing, upon omniscience, upon total ignorance, upon that moment for which both are true, upon the Nothing from which all things flow. An oracle depends upon the entire state of things and that which set them in motion. Yeats consulted many oracles in search of what he called in speaking to me "a belief which is moving," one which would correspond to the fullest life of the imagination and the deepest expression of a man's soul. Mr. T. S. Eliot, setting against the seances and superstitions of Yeats's youth and middle period the pious sincerity of the late work, declares in After Strange Gods that Yeats has triumphed "against the greatest odds." Yet this clash between the all-knowing and the all-ignorant dominates his work from first to last. If the oracles of the last poems are more true, it is because the poet brings worship and not spec-



ulation to his enquiry: doubt has been replaced by faith.

Yeats, in his essay on Louis Lambert, thinks that Balzac, when still at school, when he was composing with his friend or faisant Louis Lambert the Treatise of the Will, may have had access to the works of Bonaventura and Grosseteste; and he quotes Grosseteste's doctrine that light confers form upon First Matter. "Light is corporeality," he declares, "or that of which corporeality is made, a point from which spheral space flows as from nothing."

In one of the last poems, "Long-Legged Fly," Yeats puts his finger on that point, that nothing, that silence. The poem has three verses, and in each he traces a great medium of power to its source, to the point of stillness that is moving, of movement that is still. The miraculous effect of the refrain, the lingering word "stream," and the slow last line, can be seen only in full quotation:

That civilization may not sink,  
Its great battle lost,  
Quiet the dog, tether the pony  
To a distant post;  
Our master Caesar is in the tent  
Where the maps are spread,  
His eyes fixed upon nothing,  
A hand under his head.

Like a long-legged fly upon the stream  
His mind moves upon silence.

That the topleless towers be burnt  
And men recall that face,  
Move most gently if move you must  
In this lonely place.  
She thinks, part woman, three parts a child,  
That nobody looks; her feet  
Practice a tinker shuffle  
Picked up on a street.

Like a long-legged fly upon the stream  
Her mind moves upon silence.

That girls at puberty may find  
 The first Adam in their thought,  
 Shut the door of the Pope's chapel,  
 Keep those children out.  
 There on that scaffolding reclines  
 Michael Angelo.  
 With no more sound than the mice make  
 His hand moves to and fro.

Like a long-legged fly upon the stream  
His mind moves upon silence.

That poem, a poem of great introspection, shows clearly the interior force of Yeats's imagination, moving always to the centre, and seeking in its most archetypal form, Caesar, Helen, Adam. Yet there is no lyric of Yeats's maturity, however light, which is not the counterpoint of great introspection; each is intensified by the unseen allegory in opposition to which it has sprung. When the beggars of his poetry have pulled him out of doors they are enacting the same truths, in exultation or in mockery. His poetry emphasizes a fixed relationship between imaginative riches and beggary, between intellectual and emotional toil. The aura of light which surrounds the forms in these poems is derived from a scholar's lamp that has been quenched. The imaginative life is inseparable from the imaginative death. The Tower is not far from the barefoot Galway children going to school.

When I think of the later lyrics, in contrast to the more artificial, yet already subtle, early poems in which the correction was pantheistic rather than spiritual, I remember how Yeats had, even in those early poems, invested objects and natural appearances, such as the movement of leaves or of a stream, with their own particular music, the reward of minute observation. He had already found how fundamentally the Minute Particulars of which Blake wrote could change a poem, and make it unforgettable. He

told me in 1938 that at first he had been incoherent because he lacked a technique, but that when he went to London he learnt how to use the tool of his technique from a bad poet whom he did not name. The minute correction is, then, already in the early poems; but what becomes of it, this oracle of music, this pantheistic correction, precise, though not yet related to an allegory, when the style is stripped and the later lyrics begin to appear? The answer is to be found in the poems of "Responsibilities," and even more poignantly in the lyrical sequence of The Tower and The Winding Stair: "A Man Young and Old," "A Woman Young and Old," and "Words for Music Perhaps." These are love poems that seem a quarrel between soul and body, in which the emotion is so rarefied by age, the music so intimate and penetrating, that language has set no impediment between the naked words and their theme. The poems of "Words for Music Perhaps," many of which were composed rapidly in the spring of 1929, form one of the most beautiful lyrical sequences in our language, where the very bones of language become luminous, clothing themselves with momentarily lovely flesh, weaving themselves into patterns, dances suspended by a sung line, a refrain, when the figures pause. The characters are Crazy Janes, Jack the Journeyman, and the Bishop, whom she sets in opposition to each other; Young Man, Young Girl, Tom the Lunatic, and, in "Three Things," a woman's bone, a bone of three regrets, "a bone wave-whitened and dried in the wind." In these poems Yeats has used odd or blasphemous characters to state profound religious truths. Crazy Jane, in the poem "Crazy Jane on God," anticipates the late play Purgatory:

Before their eyes a house

That from childhood stood  
 Uninhabited, ruinous,  
 Suddenly lit up  
 From door to top:  
 All things remain in God.

And Tom the Lunatic sings:

Whatever stands in field or flood,  
 Bird, beast, fish or man,  
 Mare or stallion, cock or hen,  
 Stands in God's unchanging eye  
 In all the vigour of its blood;  
 In that faith I live or die.

In Yeats, as in Plotinus, the miracle of the far thing is established by the miracle of the near, and the two are interdependent. He quotes this passage from Plotinus in his notes on The Tower:

Let every soul recall, then, at the outset the truth that soul is the author of all living things, that it has breathed life into them all, whatever is nourished by the earth and sea, all the creatures of the air, the divine stars in the sky; it is the maker of the sun; itself formed and ordered this vast heaven and conducts all that rhythmic motion--and it is a principle distinct from all these to which it gives law and movement and life, and it must of necessity be more honourable than they, for they gather or dissolve as soul brings them life or abandons them, but soul, since it can never abandon itself, is of eternal being.

How close to Plotinus is the opening of "A Dialogue of Self and Soul":

I summon to your winding ancient stair;  
 Set all your mind upon the steep ascent,  
 Upon the broken, crumbling battlement,  
 Upon the breathless starlit air,  
 Upon the star that marks the hidden pole;  
 Fix every wandering thought upon  
 That quarter where all thought is done:  
 Who can distinguish darkness from the soul?

Yet how unlike Plotinus are the following lines, taken from the poem "Nineteen-Nineteen" printed in The Tower, which shows Yeats's power in the reverse direction, of contracting infinity to a narrow space and an image of violence:

The night can sweat with terror as before  
 We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,  
 And planned to bring the world under a rule,  
 Who are but weasels fighting in a hole.

The introspective oracles in passages such as this seem to drive his imagination to its utmost pitch, and then to drop him upon the hard, discordant world which had mocked his flight, as an eagle drops its prey. That moment when faith is reversed to its opposite is the moment of dramatization, the seeing moment, when all things around him are suddenly seen in an extraordinary unity. The supreme example of this is found in the opening of his great poem, "The Second Coming":

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
 The blood-dimmed time is loosed, and everywhere  
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
 Are full of passionate intensity.

Yeats had earlier described how he had a recurrent vision, just behind his left elbow and always out of sight, of a "brazen-winged beast" which he takes as a symbol of laughter and destruction. This image is not only found, somewhat transformed, in "The Second Coming," but it occurs again in the sequence "Meditations in Time of Civil War," where "brazen hawks" drive out the "ladies with musing eyes riding on magical unicorns," which are for Yeats a symbol of violence but also of chastity. This is the terror of the Platonic Year which, as he says in the poem "Nineteen-Nineteen":

Whirls out new right and wrong,  
 Whirls in the old instead.

In the Preface to his prose play The Resurrection, printed in Wheels and Butterflies, Yeats recounts the history of the Platonic Year. He writes:

Ptolemy thought the procession of the equinoxes moved at the rate of a degree every hundred years, and that somewhere about the time of Christ and Caesar the equinoctical sun had returned to its original place in the constellations, completing and recommencing the thirty-six thousand years, of three hundred years apiece, of Plato's man of Ur. Hitherto almost every philosopher had some different measure for the Greatest Year, but this Platonic year, as it was called, soon displaced all others; it was a Christian heresy in the twelfth century, and in the East, multiplied by twelve as if it were but a month of a still greater year, it became the Manvantra of 432,000 years, until animated by the Indian jungle it generated new noughts and multiplied itself into Kalpas.

In writing this Preface in the early thirties Yeats feels that the only thing lacking to his vision is the proof that man has lived many times:

Even though we think temporary existence illusionary it cannot be capricious; it is what Plotinus called the characteristic act of the soul and must reflect the soul's coherence. All our thought seems to lead by antithesis to some new affirmation of the supernatural...In a few years perhaps we may have much empirical evidence, the only evidence that moves the mass of men today, that man has lived many times... We may come to think that nothing exists but a stream of souls, that all knowledge is biography, and with Plotinus that every soul is unique; that these souls, these eternal archetypes, combine into greater units as days and nights into months, months into years, and at last into the final unit that differs in nothing from that which they were at the beginning: everywhere that antinomy of the One and the Many that Plato thought in his "Parmenides" insoluble, though Blake thought it soluble "at the bottom of the graves."

In Yeats's earlier play Calvary his ideas of subjectivity and objectivity symbolized in birds and beasts (the solitary subjective life in the heron and the objective life with its need of company and sympathy in the gregarious birds and beasts that move in packs, ideas elaborated at great length in the Michael Robartes parts of A Vision) were used as a dramatic base, but they

proved unconvincing. In the later play, The Resurrection, first performed in 1934, where those ideas have **been abandoned**, the apprehension of religious truth is immediate and powerful. The play is set in the Upper Room of the Last Supper, after the Crucifixion. In it a Hebrew is discovered alone, but immediately a Greek enters. They look out at Calvary through a window, and the Greek begins to laugh.

--The Hebrew: Be quiet. You do not know what you are doing. You have gone out of your mind. You are laughing at Calvary.

--The Greek: No, no. I am laughing because they thought they were nailing the hands of a living man upon the Cross, and all the time there was nothing but a phantom.

They talk, and the Hebrew says how Christ "thought that he himself was the Messiah. He thought it because of all destinies it seemed the most terrible."

--The Greek: How could a man think himself the Messiah?

--The Hebrew: It was always foretold that he would be born of a woman.

--The Greek: To say that a god can be born of a woman, carried in her womb, fed upon her breast, washed as children are washed, is the most terrible blasphemy.

There is then, as in Calvary, a procession of mockery, the worshipper of Dionysus, at which Greek and Hebrew peer through the window.

Then a Syrian runs in, and when he has got his breath, tells them that Christ's tomb is empty. The Hebrew will not believe it, but the Greek does. He says: "I am certain that Jesus never had a human body; that he is a phantom and can pass through that wall; that he will so pass; that he will pass through this room; that he himself will speak to the apostles."

When Christ enters at the end of the play the Syrian draws back the curtains of the inner room, and the Hebrew kneels. The

Greek alone is not overawed. He says:

It is the phantom of our master. Why are you afraid? He has been crucified and buried, but only in semblance, and is among us once more...There is nothing here but a phantom, it has no flesh and blood. Because I know the truth I am not afraid. Look, I will touch it. It may be hard under my hand like a statue--I have heard of such things--or my hand may pass through it--but there is no flesh and blood.

He goes slowly up to the figure and passes his hand over its side.

--The Greek: The heart of an phantom is beating! The heart of a phantom is beating!

He screams; Christ crosses the stage and passes into the inner room where the apostles are; and the play ends on the Greek's words: "O Athens, Alexandria, Rome, something has come to deatroy you! The heart of a phantom is beating! Man has begun to die. Your works are clear at last, O Heraclitus. God and man die each other's life, live each other's death."

Musician's songs open and close the play, the second verse of the opening song recalling Shelley in the final chorus of

Hellas:

Another Troy must rise and set,  
Another lineage feed the crow,  
Another Argo's painted prow  
Drive to a flashier bauble yet.  
The Roman Empire stood appalled:  
It dropped the reins of peace and war  
When that fierce Virgin and her Star  
Out of the fabulous darkness called.

When Yeats writes about Christ, as he does in "Wisdom," "The Mother of God," and "A Prayer for My Son," contact with the soil, with natural objects, and with human milk is always kept. Protective human love is celebrated as guarding and nursing divine love, although it can scarcely endure the terror of its



care. Religion is in these poems centered in the tradition of the family, as depicted by medieval painters.

It would be a mistake, however, to seek only in the poems which directly invoke Christianity the evidence of Yeats's religious feeling. It is found everywhere in the late work. I have already said that all the later poems are poems of conscience. It is this quality more than any other that gives them so sharp a contrast to the early work. Paradoxically Yeats brings a pagan strength to the poems which deal directly with Christianity, and he brings Christianity to his poems of pagan theme. "Wisdom," "The Mother of God," "A Prayer for My Son," and "Veronica's Napkin" are not only devotional poems but are also dialogues between Self and Soul. For Yeats is a poet of religious conflict in all the late work. As a poet who cannot accept time as a reality, and yet accpets miracles and the immortality of the soul, who, ageing, sees in passionate memory the souls and characters time has wronged, his conflict runs deeper, through its refusal of wistfulness, than any other poet since Dante. But in what poet is there so condensed a religious poem as "Veronica's Napkin," in which a holy relic draws the Old Testament and Eden, the New Testament and Calvary, into eight lines?

The Heavenly Circuit; Berenice's Hair;  
Tent-pole of Eden; the tent's drapery;  
Symbolical glory of the earth and air!  
The Father and his angelic hierarchy  
That made the magnitude and glory there  
Stood in the circuit of a needle's eye.

Some found a different pole, and where it stood  
A pattern on a napkin dipped in blood.

The conflict between heroic, Homeric man and the flesh-

renouncing ascetic, as symbolized by Saint Patrick, runs through all Yeats's work from "The Wanderings of Usheen" to the last poems. In The Land of Heart's Desire it is the faery world that is set in opposition to the crucifix. In "Vacillation," written in 1932, there is a section which has this dialogue between Soul and Heart:

The Soul: Seek out reality, leave things that seem.  
 The Heart: What, be a singer born and lack a theme?  
 The Soul: Isaiah's coal, what more can man desire?  
 The Heart: Struck dumb in the simplicity of fire!  
 The Soul: Look on that fire, salvation walks within.  
 The Heart: What theme had Homer but original sin?

And this section is followed by a valedictory message to "the sincere and noble Von Hugel," beginning:

Must be part, Von Hugel, though much alike, for we  
 Accept the miracles of the saints and honour sanctity?

in which Yeats declares:

I, though heart might find relief  
 Did I become a Christian man and choose for my belief  
 What seems most welcome in the tomb--play a predestined part.  
 Homer is my example and his unchristened heart.

Yet the religious faith eludes the decision of the Self. The belief is constant; the belief is moving. The momentary definition of the mind serves only to bring the poet to a new position, for every decision Yeats makes in one poem creates its opposite in another, and in this poem, composed of contraries, the reader is aware, even in renunciation, of a light of faith springing from that renunciation which had not been apparent before the decision was taken. Yeats knows the twofold task of a poet, and he is redeeming the contraries, just as Blake had done before him.

On the whole the poems of The Winding Stair (1933), where "Vacillation" appears, emphasize the victory of the Self in the

conflict, and those in The Tower, printed five years earlier, emphasize the need of wisdom for the victory of the Soul. At the end of The Tower Yeats writes:

Now I shall make my soul  
Compelling it to study  
In a learned school,

and the great poem "Sailing to Byzantium," which opens the book, is Yeats's clearest statement of the Soul's desire to be abstracted from life into the heavens of Wisdom, a desire which is contradicted by the Self in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," printed in The Winding Stair. Byzantium is for Yeats at once historical and permanent, a recurrent symbol and focal point of vision; and in "Byzantium," also printed in The Winding Stair, the prayer expressed in "Sailing to Byzantium" is fulfilled. In this poem it is the heaven of art that is celebrated. The poet sees in a vision the work of the Byzantine goldsmiths, the Emperor's golden bird, and on the cathedral's marble floor a design of dolphins bearing souls to Paradise, as purging away continually, through the purity of their pattern, "the fury and the mire of human veins"

"Byzantium" reveals a new turn in Yeats's belief. At this point he has reached the conviction not only that spirits control art, but that the finished work of art has the power to control spirits. His imagination is moving towards the last poems, towards "Lapis Lazuli," in which the indestructible joy of art is celebrated in the very moment of calamity. Joy in the midst of tragedy is its theme, the invincible gaiety of those who create art and so rebuild civilization from its ruins:

All perform their tragic play,  
There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,

That's Ophelia, that Cordelia;  
 Yet they, should the last scene be there,  
 The great stage curtain about to drop,  
 If worthy their prominent part in the play,  
 Do not break up their lines to weep.  
 They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;  
 Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.  
 All men have aimed at, found and lost;  
 Black out; Heaven blazing into the head:  
 Tragedy wrought to its uttermost.  
 Though Hamlet rambles and Lear rages,  
 And all the drop-scene drop at once  
 Upon a hundred thousand stages,  
 It cannot grow by an inch or an ounce.

On their own feet they came, or on shipboard,  
 Camel-back, horse-back, ass-back, mule-back.  
 Old civilizations put to the sword.  
 Then they and their wisdom went to wrack.  
 No handiwork of Callimachus,  
 Who handled marble as if it were bronze,  
 Made draperies that seemed to rise  
 When sea-wind swept the corner, stands;  
 His long lamp-chimney shaped like the stem  
 Of a slender palm, stood but a day;  
 All things fall and are built again,  
 And those that build them again are gay.

The poem ends with a description of three Chinamen climbing a mountain and then seated at a little half-way house on its slope above a scene of destruction:

There, on the mountain and the sky,  
 On all the tragic scene they stare.  
 One asks for mournful melodies;  
 Accomplished fingers begin to play.  
 Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,  
 Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.

Yeats's Introduction to "An Indian Monk," "The Holy Mountain," and "Mandukya Upanishad," published by the Cuala Press in the book of Essays of 1937, and his translation with Shree Purohi Swami of the "Ten Principle Upanishads," reflect his great interest in Indian mysticism. In the visions of men seeking initiation into states of blessedness and in their pilgrimages he had found yet another manifestation of the Unity of Being which he

sought. He had always been, from early youth, intensely religious. His father, who revolted against Victorian morality masquerading as religious truth, had taught the boy to despise every secondhand statement and seek always what was most intense and real in his own feeling. At the end of his life Yeats referred to his father's studio as his workshop; his influence was the most lasting upon the poet, the influence of a vigorous, agnostic love of beauty and of character upon an instinctively religious sensibility. Quite early in life Yeats felt himself destined to lead "the revolt of feeling against the intellect." In doing so he explored every avenue of religious truth, being constantly drawn to Eastern mysticism, studying the most ancient texts of Europe and Asia, and attempting to reconcile the experiences of Buddhist ascetics to the miracles of the saints in Western Christianity.

The Greek philosophers Pythagoras, Plato, and Plotinus move through the later poems; Aeschylus and Sophocles haunt his dramatic vision; and the desire to bring Ireland and Greece together becomes more insistent with age. Like Holderlin, he feels the need to bring Asia, Greece, and his own country into harmony; in poems like "The Statues" and "News for the Delphic Oracle" they meet. In one of his most beautiful blank-verse poems he imagines an Indian hermit at the tomb of the legendary Irish lovers Baile and Aileen.

There are poems in the late work where Christianity is seen through alien eyes. In "Supernatural Songs," written four years before he died, this hermit Ribh is an imaginary critic of Saint

Patrick. "His Christianity," writes Yeats in the Preface to A Full Moon in March, "come perhaps from Egypt like much early Irish Christianity, echoes pre-Christian thought." The poem "Ribh Denounces Patrick" declares:

Natural and supernatural with the self-same ring are wed.  
As man, as beast, as an ephemeral fly begets,  
Godhead begets Godhead,

and ends:

The mirror-scaled serpent is multiplicity,  
But all that run in couples, on earth, in flood or air,  
share God that is but three,  
And could beget and bear themselves could they but love as he.

While it is easy to see how pagan, for all its religious imagery, is the early poetry of Yeats, it is less easy to see how the transition was made from one to the other. In the early work the god seems to be annexed to the poem, in the late work it is the source of the poem's intensity. How did Yeats come from that god of the Celtic Twilight, of the early poems, that mythological figure who stands "winding his lonely horn" and is the "Herdsman" who goads the years like black oxen at the end of The Countess Cathleen, to "the old man of the skies," that invisible figure of compassion who dominates the last poems? He has recorded for us in Autobiographies the moment when his imagination passed from paganism to Christianity, and this must have been the moment when the late work was conceived. He says:

I was crossing a little stream near Inchy Wood and actually in the middle of a stride from bank to bank when an emotion never experienced before swept down upon me. I said, "That is what the devout Christian feels, that is how he surrenders his will to the will of God." I felt an extreme surprise, for my whole imagination was pre-occupied with the pagan mythology of ancient Ireland, I was marking, in red ink, upon a large map, every sacred mountain. The next morning I woke near dawn, to hear a voice saying, "The love of God is infinite for every human soul because every human soul is unique, no other can satisfy the same need in God."

"Context"

London Magazine, N. S. I, 11 (February 1962), 43-44.

This questionnaire was headed "The following questions were sent to a number of poets, for them to answer individually of to use as a basis for a general statement about the writing of poetry today." The questions, originally printed at the head of the article only, were as follows:

- (a) Would poetry be more effective, i. e. interest more people more profoundly, if it were concerned with the issues of our time?
- (b) Do you feel your views on politics or religion influence the kind of poetry you write? Alternatively, do you think poetry has uses as well as pleasure?
- (c) Do you feel any dissatisfaction with the short lyric as a poetic medium? If so, are there any poems of a longer or non-lyric kind that you visualize yourself writing?
- (d) What living poets continue to influence you, English or American?
- (e) Are you conscious of any current 'poeticization' of language which requires to be broken up in favour of a more 'natural' diction? Alternatively, do you feel any undue impoverishment in poetic diction at the moment?
- (f) Do you see this as a good or bad period for writing poetry?

Among the other poets who answered were Robert Graves, C. Day Lewis, Stephen Spender, Philip Larkin, Lawrence Durrell, Roy Fuller, Thom Gunn, Ted Hughes, and Elizabeth Jennings.

Perhaps because he was the only Welsh poet among the twenty-six questioned, or because he was the only religious poet, Watkins' remarks are different from the others. He is the only one to speak of poetry as something beyond the self and distinct from an ordinary occupation. He is the only one to speak of the imagination, and the only one to say a poet may ignore the issues of his time.

## Context

If I were not myself a practitioner I might feel very differently about writing poetry. In theory I believe in every variety of poetic activity, in every creative form, but in practice I find myself much more compelled by a certain kind of poetry than by other kinds.

I feel that a poet cannot choose his material, that it is offered to him in an uncompromising way. My own experience is that I am always pulled back to the demands of a poem from the wide, speculative ares which lie outside it. As for other poets, I am sure that it is better for a poet to give all his attention to the object of his imagination, even with a total disregard of the issues of our time, than to give a part of it to those issues from a feeling of duty.

Certainly my poetry depends, for its existence at all, on a religious attitude to life.

I believe that lyric poetry is closer to music than to prose, and that it should be read as exactly as a musical score. I also believe that it is always a gift, the reward of tenacity and minutest attention, and that unless it comes out of exaltation or moves towards it, it is not worth writing.

I suppose every writer, in applauding another's work, undergoes a modulation of sensibility, but I cannot see how any poet whose roots are deep can be fundamentally influenced by a living contemporary. I never think a true style can be learnt from contemporaries.

A good poem is one that can never be fashionable. What is



fresh must also be ancient, and a poem is not finished until it attains its most ancient form. The more ancient a poem is, the more modern it becomes; and will remain so, when apparent modernity is obsolete.

The handling of language is inexhaustibly mysterious. To write poems in the order of natural speech can be very good, but that is by no means the only criterion of excellence. Every restrictive theory of writing leads to monotony, and unforgettable poetry springs only when theory is abandoned, and from recognition that the order of imaginative emphasis is right, whether it is the order of natural speech or not. Natural speech is a corrective of artificial poetic diction, but form is itself artificial, and unless the artificial demands of form are satisfied in a poem, its impulsive life will not be held in a lasting form.

I think every age is as good and as bad as possible for writing poetry. The more the fledgling is pampered, the sillier it becomes. There is now an abundance of talent in Britain and America. Some poets employ strict form, others what is almost a prose medium. The potentialities of prose as a medium of communication must not be under-estimated, but ultimately one is bound to ask whether the virtues of the poem are prose virtues. Perhaps, if they are truly memorable, it does not matter.

"The Need of the Artist"

Listener, LXVIII, 1754 (November 8, 1962), 756-757

Watkins knew many painters and musicians, and was very knowledgeable of modern art, particularly of Wales. When speaking of art, he mentions most often Ceri Richards, David Jones and William Blake, three men who excelled in more than one art. It was his one serious disappointment in life, that he had no musical or artistic ability.

He did not know nearly as much about music as about painting, nor had he experienced as much. His taste was catholic, chiefly through having only a superficial acquaintance, but he liked Mozart and Debussy best.

Here and in other papers on art, Watkins deliberately avoids using the current art-criticism jargon, for he was much more concerned with communicating something definite than he was in many of the papers on other subjects. He works hard to be clear--answering his own rhetorical questions, rephrasing, repeating, and avoiding gnomic or oracular statement.

### The Need of the Artist

Swansea's annual Festival of the Arts is primarily a Festival of Music, but it is also devoted to visual art in its supporting exhibitions. There is probably more evidence of the artistic life of Wales in the exhibitions of painting and sculpture than in the Festival's music concerts, which mainly serve the town with masterpieces drawn from the tradition of music, but offer little that is freshly composed.

Why is it that, since the beginning or middle of the thirties, Swansea has been so strong and sensitive a nerve-centre of this artistic life? I think of Ceri Richards's early paintings and of the emergence of Dylan Thomas's first poems, for which Ceri Richards himself made designs, which are in no way illustrations but rather equivalents in another medium. The painter, himself a gifted pianist, reflects the influence of music in his style, and even directly, in his 'Homage to Beethoven' paintings, extols it.

There is a bond between all the arts: of this I am deeply conscious. And there is a bond between all artists, of which I am conscious, too. An artist is a man born with a need. This need is so urgent that it makes all his activities return to it, as to a centre. The need is always accompanied by a gift, and the gift compels the artist to concentrate on it all his energy and attention. The demands of the imagination must be met: that is the need, and it is always in movement. An artist, then, is someone whose life is incomplete, and who is destined to complete it by his art. Does this incompleteness apply to society, does it

apply to a town? The artist needs his art, but does the town need the artist? Why put the question? A town without art is a dead town. A country aware of art is a living country. A city has no right to be remembered except for what a materialist would call its wasteful productions.

Ezra Pound has said: 'Artists are the antennae of the race.' They are ahead of their time. Their heightened awareness already experiences what appears only gradually to their fellow men. They present what is already known, but with an enhanced judgment; and they reveal what is unfamiliar, new aspects of form which are brought into the realm of common understanding. The works of a great master represent the need and the gift in their highest and most intense operation. Paradoxically such works may have been scarcely recognized in the lifetime of the artist. A town's richest treasure may be the works of a man who had this need and this gift, and who died penniless. Artists are the antennae of the race, and in the past it generally took a generation, or more than one, to catch up with their genius. In poetry, genuine recognition often comes later still, and a century may pass before the true need of the poet is reflected in his audience.

The excitement of painting, whether it is seen by the professional or by someone like me who cannot paint, is not only the excitement of performance; it is also the excitement of detail and potential. To this excitement the fragment and the resolved work both belong.

It is the relationship of an artist to himself that matters to the public. He is, as it were, caught up in a conversation

which is only made clear to him by the works he produces. The conversation may be stimulated, as in life, by the fortuitous; but basically the need of the artist lies deeper, and of this the fragment may be as eloquent as the completed work. It is of completed works that I am now thinking, and I want to illustrate what I say with examples from the exhibition of paintings by Alfred Janes and Will Roberts, opened in Llanelly in July, which is now touring Wales. This is the most recent exhibition I have seen, and it filled me with excitement. I have nothing to offer to the tide of current art criticism in the way of comment, to satisfy those cormorants of curiosity who watch only the tide. I am concerned only with the artist's relation to himself, and I say that Will Roberts's 'Man Reading', or 'Man with a Pipe', reads or smokes his pipe in order to throw light on the artist's vision. Alfred Janes's early portrait of Dylan Thomas must be admired for its wonderful likeness to the poet, but it is also infused with Janes's conception of what imagination means, and of its extraordinary potential in his young friend.

Certainly in Wales today something extraordinary has happened. We are not living in a renaissance of painting, for the rich and varied works of visual art which Welsh painters are producing, as well as painters like Joseph Herman and George Fairley who have lived in Wales for a long time, have no precedent in this country. We are living, since approximately 1935, at the beginning of a tradition, and some of the paintings to be seen today may be among the first of its Old Masters. If we look back,

say, to the beginning of the century, we find the example of Innes, whose sensitive nature gave him a reaction to landscape which made his paintings distinctly his own; and we have the very considerable example of Augustus John. What we do not have is a precedent for the kind of painting that is being produced today by the best Welsh artists, works of professional excellence whose richness and scope and far-reaching experiment could not have been foreseen.

The sudden presentation of a wide range of new work by gifted artists has been accompanied by a keener awareness of art than ever existed in Wales before, an awareness which the Arts Council, by sponsoring exhibitions, has been at pains to foster. The teaching of art has become much more expert and more widely diffused. People's interest is no longer retrospective alone; it is also directed, probably more than ever before in this country, to contemporary achievement, to what is being produced. Among a great many people visual art has become a part of life, and they have gained access to art through the present day's assimilation of the ages. It is now up to them to feel their way back, and again forward.

There could hardly be artists more dissimilar than the two painters whose exhibition I saw in Llanelly: yet I came away from it with a sense of unity. I was not fortunate enough to meet Will Roberts so early as Alfred Janes. I knew many of his paintings and would quickly recognize them before I met the man. He is concerned with everyday life, with the way people live and work, or do not work. He is able to give dignity to the casual

scene, and make it memorable. Landscape and figure are subordinated to a mood. He is a warm painter, and he understands the vibrations of intimate life, whether the scene is a farm or a country road or a room where people are talking or going to sleep. It is the ephemeral moment he records, in a forceful and simple way. He has evolved his own recognizable world, and he communicates it all at once.

All art is unpredictable, and a painter's own development is unpredictable, too. When I first met Alfred Janes in 1935 he was absorbed in a certain kind of still life. He had developed a particularly brilliant method of handling the geometrical patterns of fish and fruit in a kind of musical order. He told me at this time that perhaps the greatest influence on his painting was the double violin concerto of Bach. His method was so painstaking he would spend hundreds of hours, perhaps six months, on the same canvas; and his patience became a byword among his friends. Even in 1946 Dylan Thomas was writing to me in a letter: 'How is that blizzardly painter, that lightning artist, that prodigal canvas-stacker? Has he reached the next finbone yet of the fish he was dashing off before the war?' Between those early still-life paintings and the magnificent abstracts, that are not really abstracts, which are his most recent work, there is a sustained history of concentration and self-renewal in this artist. He has never become smug or lost his urge to experiment. Dylan Thomas would be amazed at the profusion of paintings that has emerged from these successive styles. In each phase of Alfred Janes's development there is an extra-

ordinary meticulousness and mastery, at once recognizable as his own.

What is the bond between these two artists who are so contrasted in their styles? It is complete integrity, complete honesty. Neither is pompous. If an artist becomes pompous, it always spoils his work. If the gift outruns the need, he becomes a virtuoso, he loses the thread of concentration and gives himself over to display. Integrity is at the root of all great art, at the source of what is eternally fresh, eternally beginning. In every true master the need of the imagination is the first thing before him.

Between all artists what is the bond? It is the recognition of the incompleteness, even the barrenness, of life without art. I am not saying that the need or ability to create art is the highest and most indispensable gift of man: charity is clearly that. But I do say that art is man's most exhilarating, as well as his most searching, activity.

There are Welsh artists now unmatched by any others in their particular medium; their integrity has reached a point where comparison ceases to be relevant. The force and the poetry of colour in Ceri Richards belong to this pure, unrivalled air, and there is a coherence of vision in all that David Jones touches, whether in language or design, painting or drawing, that sets him apart. There are many others.

The need of the artist is, as I have said, in movement, and it is impossible to define a school of Welsh painting, to set national limits. For what is a national artist? In order to see



the paintings of Will Roberts and Alfred Janes I travelled down from Swansea to Llanelly. A national artist could only make that journey slowly, and with a great many changes. He would have to see, not only European art, but the art of Asia, Africa, and America. He could not arrive without considering for a long time the paintings of the Lascaux caves. In all the arts we look to ancient examples; all achievement has a reference to what has gone before. The history of art is not only the history of civilizations, but on a deeper level the history of man's sensibility. What was valid in remote times as an aesthetic marvel is valid now, and the excitement then experienced is our excitement. Art is a spring that is never dry. It is the ancestral wonder of art, from its first beginnings, in those masterpieces of so many ages, which throws the paintings on our walls into relief.

Commentary on "Poet and Goldsmith"  
Originally in Poet's Choice, ed. Engle and Langland (New York:  
Dial, 1962), 90-91.

Watkins' manuscripts<sup>1</sup> include thirteen versions of "Poet and Goldsmith" under the titles "Taliesin at Sunset," "Words in a Field," "Taliesin and the Rocks of Wales," "In the Field at Sunset," and simply "Sunset." The earliest version, marked "For the Taliesin Sequence," contains nine lines identical, save for a few phrases, to an early version of "Taliesin and the Spring of Vision," which was originally titled "Taliesin's Poetry in the Rocks of Wales." This overlapping (not to say confusion) was a frequent problem, especially since Watkins liked to construct sequences of poems and was not above quoting or echoing himself.

"Poet and Goldsmith" was originally published in The London Magazine for July 1954, and is included in Cypress and Acacia, pages 36-37.

<sup>1</sup>British Museum Additional Manuscript 54162 745<sup>F</sup> Cypress and Acacia.

## Commentary on "Poet and Goldsmith"

I cannot pick a single poem to represent me better than others, so I pick one that is near the root of everything I write. This poem, with its very slight element of rhyme, is built upon the pivotal point between one way of writing and another. It is about nature, and about transfigured nature. To those who have never looked through or beyond nature, if there are such people, it must be meaningless. Unredeemed nature can only offer to the poet a vista which leads to despair, and it is the liberation from that despair which is the motif of this poem and the substance of its exultation.

The very last words of the poem came to me many years before the poem was made, but when I began to write it, nine or ten years later, I used the provisional title, "Taliesin at Sunset." Taliesin was an early Welsh poet who claimed to have lived in all ages. I changed the title, and I am glad I changed it, but the elements of the first title are still there. You may, if you like, say that this poem is about Taliesin looking at the created universe from the standpoint of Christian faith, which I call the pivotal point between one way of writing and another.

"The Second Pressure in Poetry"  
Unicorn, X (Spring 1963), 9-10

Watkins' objections to anthologies did not extend to withholding his work from them. From Keidrych Rhys' Modern Welsh Poetry (1944) to Gerald Morgan's This World of Wales (1968) he contributed to several anthologies every year; counting translations, the total is over a hundred.

He was very serious about reading one poet at a time, a habit he began in prep school and never wholly dropped. When he first discovered Blake he read nothing else for over a year; and a new work by a favorite author would be the occasion for a lengthy re-reading of his total output. While this method prevented having an inclusive knowledge of a literature, it assured strength in certain areas.

## The Second Pressure in Poetry

It is the time of year when readers congregate, when ideas cluster around an unseen point in the sky, the season for the migration of anthologies. There are readers who look for a message, or a new kind of syntax; there are those who expect a portent, or a clever synthesis of what they already know. There are those who want to know where they are going, and there are those who want to know where they were. Some look only for innovation, and others are armed to the teeth against anything new. It seems that nothing will ever reconcile so many opposites or draw to a single point such varied and contrary dispositions. I am speaking of people who say that poetry matters to them, whether it is past, present, or future. Yet they move, and are moved, in a way and for reasons which they do not understand. No anthology will ever be made that will satisfy all of them. If they happen to be poets, no anthology will ever be made that will satisfy even one.

An anthology of contemporary poetry is supposed to reflect the time, the *Zeitgeist*, better than the work of a single poet, but its whole interest for a poet is in the single works outside it which it represents; he uses it only as a pointer to those individual poets for whom he deeply cares. Imaginatively it is always more rewarding to read one poet at a time than to read many.

What do I find in a poet's separated work that I do not find in an anthology? I find contradictions, the interplay of

light or shadow among all the poems, the mystery of self-renewal, or, if the imagination is stubborn, the refusal to change. All these things may become evident in an anthology, but only if the poet's work is separately known.

When I was nine I began to collect the English poets, and for many years I identified poetry as spontaneous genius pouring through the poet and requiring no effort from him. From then until my early twenties I wrote pretty continuously, except for one year at fifteen, when I stopped. In my teens I distrusted in composition what did not come rapidly, and I looked on revision as an impediment to the stream. I knew that Adonais had been written in five days, and I saw inspiration as the source of light, the original brilliance which could only be tarnished by the deliberating mind.

In two things I have remained constant to my first impression of the nature of poetry. I believe, as I did then, that lyric poetry is closer to music than to prose. And I believe in the gifts of instant and unalterable truth which a poet cannot predict, and for whose coming he must wait. I think it extremely rare for these gifts to come as whole poems, but they are the parts of a poem which a poet must never discard, however hard he has to work to find their true place in the composition.

I no longer associate art with the natural man. Metaphysically I have taken sides. I am interested only in poetry of the second pressure. True spontaneity, true art, seems to me to come, more often than not, long after the poem's first

conception; it is the more powerful for being delayed and the purer for having been tried in the furnace of contraries. The poem cannot live until it has been willing to die; it cannot fly like the phoenix until it has been consumed by its own flames. Every thing seems to me shallow that is not related to an inner experience which changed the man. There is always, in any serious poet, a moment of change, a pivotal crisis in time, that renews him.

"Research and Reperception" (in Italian and English)  
Poesia e Critica, 5 (December 1963), 94-99

As this rather incoherent article suggests, Watkins' dislike of scholarly analysis derived in part from his disgust at the nonsense written about Dylan Thomas. More importantly, however, he had the poet's impatience with "snivelling commentary"; he actually believed that the intelligent reader ought to be able to understand any poem, at least on the unconscious level, upon first reading it. This understanding, however, was for him not an act of the rational mind, but of the imagination. The relationship of serious reader and true poet seemed to him as subtle, symbolic and sacred as that of celebrator and receiver of the Mass. Therefore, when analyzing poetry, especially his own, he tried to recreate the poet's feelings and inspirations at the time of writing, for these cannot always be intuited by the reader.

Watkins' attitude to his own manuscripts was ambivalent. While he burned most of them, he would sometimes save a three-line scrap ten years in the hope of saving a phrase; though he considered a poem final once it was published, an old manuscript might persuade him to rewrite it. Though he spoke of early versions as useless, he saved enough to establish the largest and most nearly complete collection of contemporary manuscripts in the British Museum, every piece of which is signed.



## Research and Reperception

When a poet has finally chosen the words of a poem in the exact form in which he wants it given to the world, who but he can change it? The interest in what he has rejected has, for him in that moment, ceased to exist: it is scrubbed from the slate. Behind the finished poem lie the unfinished drafts, the labour that went into the poem before the final choice, before the moment which Yeats described as "the poem coming together like the click of a box." Yet, when such a rejected manuscript is seen, it exerts a particular fascination. It may even persuade the poet, at a later time, to alter his poem again.

The fascination of a succession of drafts towards a poem for the readers of a poet, those whom Dylan Thomas called "the strangers" in the Preface to his Collected Poems, is more complex still. Yet, however deeply they are studied, I am not sure that more will ever come to light than the surface of the iceberg, so intricate and secret and unwritten is the progress of a poem. The research scholar who emerges with an apparently unassailable argument from such studies may lose his case to a single moment of memory from a witness, and may discover that the words of the finished poem alone, and ignorance of all that labour, would have been a better guide. Who would be the better for many versions of King Lear or Hamlet? The single line of accomplishment is worth all the matrix of alternatives.

I take at random an early poem of Dylan Thomas on which he spent five or six months. Dedicated to Caitlin, whom he had

married a short time before its composition, it is the second poem in The Map of Love. My first knowledge of this poem came from Dylan himself. He and his wife arrived at my house one day in the summer of 1937, and he recited to me the opening verse of the poem and a little of what followed. He had reached in composition the end of the third verse, the line

Whalebed and bulldance, the gold bush of lions,

which was then followed by:

Proud as a mule's womb and huge as insects.

A week later he altered this second line. He had been seeking images of sterility and contrast, and it was on the beach below this cliff that he told me that, after much work on the line, he had changed it to:

Proud as a sucked stone and huge as sandgrains.

The change is interesting, not because "sandgrains" had been one of the many suggested alternatives, but because the first rejected image was, like the sixth stanza of the poem, linked with the fragment of a story, In the Direction of the Beginning, which he was writing and was to publish in Wales, in March, 1938, after the Poem to Caitlin was finished. This prose piece, the last to be written in the densely packed, symbol-charged, sexual, and sometimes surrealistic style of the early stories, has two successive phrases: "She raged in the mule's womb. She faltered in the galloping dynasty."

The exploration of research and the reperception of memory are different. I remember the excitement of hearing Dylan read In the Direction of the Beginning, the opening of what was to be

the longest and best of all those stories, and the altogether different sensation of hearing him say, walking with me in Laugharne not many months later, that he would never write that kind of story again. The fragment remained a fragment: the story never continued.

In all the early work there was a close link between poetry and prose, but a turning-point was now being reached, and the utter rejection of the style of the early prose came soon after the Poem to Caitlin was finished, and this rejection was final.

Meanwhile the poem continued. The third line of the fourth verse was at first:

Her rude, red flight up cinder-nesting columns,  
but "rude, red" had been used in the very last line of the Altarwise by Owl-light sonnet sequence; so Dylan, after some deliberation, changed this to "molten."

Not long after this Dylan told me that he had gone down into the tombs of Egypt and must come up in eight lines. He had reached the sixth verse. When he read to me the opening line:

Ruin, the room of errors, one rood dropped  
he said that he had first of all written "Ruin, the chamber of errors" and could not think what was wrong with the line. Then he remembered. It was Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors that had haunted him, and with a dropped "h." He was wonderfully amused by this: the grotesque, when it was so close to the true, always exhilarated him.

Of course the wonder he had experienced in reading about the opening of Tutankhamen's tomb is in the verse, and so, too, is the ninth sonnet of Altarwise by Owl-light, which ends:

This was the resurrection in the desert,  
 Death from a bandage, rants the mask of scholars  
 Gold on such features, and the linen spirit  
 Weds my long gentleman to dusts and furies;  
 With priest and pharaoh bed my gentle wound,  
 World in the sand, on the triangle landscape,  
 With stones of adyssey for ash and garland  
 And rivers of the dead around my neck.

And here is the sixth verse of Poem to Caitlin:

Ruin, the room of errors, one rood dropped  
 Down the stacked sea and water-pillared shade,  
 Weighed in rock shroud, is my proud pyramid;  
 Where, wound in emerald linen and sharp wind,  
 The hero's head lies scraped of every legend,  
 Comes love's anatomist with sun-gloved hand  
 And picks the live heart on a diamond.

After a couple of months on this coast Dylan went to Ringwood, in Dorset, where the poem was finished in the house of Caitlin's mother. His progress towards that final revision is indicated in the letter dated 13th November, 1937, which came to me with the poem:

'...Lines 4&5 of the last verse might, perhaps, sound too fluent: I mean, they might sound as though they came too easily in a manner I have done my best to discard, but they say exactly what I mean them to. Are they clear? Once upon a time, before my death & resurrection, before the 'terrible' world had shown itself to me (however lyingly, as lines 6&7 of the last verse might indicate) as not so terrible after all, a wind had blown that had frightened everything and created the first ice & the first frost by frightening the falling snow so much that the blood of each flake froze. This is probably clear, but, even to me, the lines skip (almost) along so that they are taken too quickly, & then mainly by the eye.'

In my reply I suggested that the last verse bore marks of hurry, of impatient composition, in spite of the slow gestation of this poem; and only a week after Dylan's first letter, came a

second, saying:

'I agree with you entirely as to the (apparently) hurried ending of my sixty-line year's work, and will alter the middle lines of the last verse.'

I have not the alternative drafts of this poem. All I write I write from memory, concerning its changes. I remember also one earlier line in the poem as forming the climax of a different composition, on a separate work-sheet. Dylan Thomas always knew what he wanted, but he did not always find immediately its true and final place. A significant example of this is the last line of his birthday poem, Twenty-Four Years, where at last the true place was found for what he had written long before.

However laborious the evidence of a poem's making, composition is always a swift, a lightning thing. The vital leap that connects one part of a poem to another is only partly shadowed in the drafts. Research belongs to time, but re-perception belongs to the source of the poem, which may be defined as time's timeless moment, the imagination looking forward from that arrested moment. Yeats has described, in Lapis Lazuli, the poet's toil, even his tragic toil, as all belonging to joy, to what is gay:

All things fall and are built again,  
And those that build them again are gay.

Nor can the research worker ever afford to forget Blake's words:

He who bends to himself a Joy  
Doth the winged life destroy;  
But he who kisses the Joy as it flies  
Lives in Eternity's sunrise.

"Ceri Richards"  
Viewpoint, 7 (1964), 12

Ceri Richards, one of Wales' greatest painters ever, was a good friend of the Watkinses from 1949 on. He illustrated several of Watkins' poems, including "Nijinski" and "Music of Colours---White Blossom."

This article was accompanied by several pages of reproductions, mainly from La Cathedrale Engloutie, Richards' most important work to date.

## Ceri Richards

In writing about Ceri Richards I am overwhelmed by a rush of images before I begin. They all belong to an unmistakable idiom, a clenched source of power. It is as though he had seized the forces of nature and reconstituted them in his own person.

Baudelaire, who wrote of Delacroix: 'Les couleurs pensent' might say today of Ceri Richards: 'Les couleurs chantent.' The violence of these paintings is in their stillness: their silence holds an inherent music. Statements may adorn the magic of their surface, but they cannot interfere with the stubborn course of genius.

Before the Welsh painter set out, he was already an accomplished musician. From the first, his pictures evoked, through the dazzling virtuosity of their technique, the intimacy of music. It dominated the 'Homage to Beethoven' paintings of the early fifties, just as it is found in the marvellous variations of Debussy's 'Le Poisson d'Or' and 'La Cathedrale Engloutie.'

One characteristic of this artist is his fidelity to particular themes. Trafalgar Square, an old Beekeeper, the Rape of the Sabines and the Lion Hunt were images to which he returned. And Debussy's music was a starting-point for a sea-voyage which has unloaded perhaps the deepest treasure of his imagination so far, a voyage of many years in which the extraordinary resources of the painter's inner vision were beckoned forth by the music. The contracted poise and animation of the many early pianist variations yield here to the mass and reverberation, under striped

and scored surfaces, of architectural echoes and organ stops submerged in the mystery of the sea.

No less compelling to his imagination has been the poetry of Dylan Thomas, whose early poem 'The force that through the green fuse drives the flower' was the theme of several paintings made in 1945; but not until a month before the poet died did they meet. After his death Ceri Richards handled the imagery of the later poetry with wonderful effect. The series of pen and wash designs for the drop cloth of the Globe Theatre Memorial Recital 'Homage to Dylan Thomas' in 1954 capture with terrifying clarity the shrouded body caught between heron and owl, or the living body racing from sight. These are in no sense illustrations, but independent creations. Both poet and painter are Welsh, and their affinity rests also in a sensuous response to the created world and to the predicament of man. The same tension is revealed in paintings based on the poem 'Do not go gentle into that good night.'

The sustained development of an artist is no accident. Gaiety, wit, joy and exuberance, all make Ceri Richards' work robust. It is in his nature to exult rather than to be disillusioned, to define strength rather than elegance, and to stamp the fragile and the ephemeral with permanence. Both he and Dylan Thomas share the vision of Blake. Both know that the Minute Particulars, rather than any generalized view of the world, are the source of organic strength.

The relief constructions of the thirties belong much more to Ceri Richards' development than to any climate of taste. This



is true of all his productions. Poetry and music are frequently used as an imaginative base for releasing his own energies, in swirling movement and concentrated speed, or in the falling movement and dilated wonder of the paintings from my poem 'Music of Colours---White Blossom.' He is a European painter whose violence and controlled delicacy are Welsh gifts. At the 1962 Venice Biennale people from all over the world were astonished by his subtle harnessing of lyric mobility to sculptural strength, of exhilaration to profound feeling, of movement to repose.

The line itself sings, less from appreciation than from praise. Where does sensuousness end and thought begin, when both give such immense pleasure, and project so instantly the mystery at the heart of painting, poetry and music? And who better understands tragedy than one who has joy at his fingertips?

In my poem 'The Forge of the Solstice' I called him to mind with two other Welsh painters, David Jones and Alfred Janes, and in the second verse tried to express one aspect of his work:

Another, curbing vigour on his page  
 To movement, makes the abounding life his own  
 And rhythmic finds in a discordant age,  
 Singing like living fountains sprung from stone,  
 Those unifying harmonies of line  
 Torn from creative nature.

Hunter and prey, prophet and witness, brought  
 Into that circle where all riddles end.  
 Love gives their art a body in which thought  
 Draws, not from time but from wisdom, till it bend  
 The solstice like a bow, and bring time round  
 White with young stars, quick from the forge they have  
 found.

"La Cathedrale Engloutie"

Catalogue of the Glynn Vivian Exhibition of Ceri Richards  
Swansea: the Glynn Vivian, 1964

The sentence beginning "Art springs from conflict" is an excellent description, not only of the work under discussion, but also of Watkins' poetry: the conflict of sea and cathedral is in, or behind, every poem Watkins every published. In fact, so close was the bond between painter and poet, so nearly identical the aims of their separate arts, that Watkins often seems to speak interchangeably of himself and Richards. Watkins' poetry has been described by critics much as he describes the painting in the second paragraph.

## La Cathedrale Engloutie

The series of paintings based upon Claude Debussy's La Cathedrale Engloutie (The Submerged Cathedral) has, in all its variety, the unity of a single profound and extremely complex vision. This theme, which has occupied Ceri Richards so searchingly for five years, was the dominant subject of his retrospective exhibition at the Venice Biennale of 1962 in which he alone represented British painting.

The mystery of these paintings must remain inexhaustible, which is always the mark of great art. Just as a supreme composition in music has the secret of self-renewal, of endlessly beginning afresh, so these pictures hold the attention through a multiplicity of images and then return it to their imaginative source where it is confronted with them again. It is this secret that makes the effect of these works a continually changing one, like a fountain which renews its identity through exuberance, and remains sudden and fresh.

There is a bond between all the arts, and his response to music and to poetry is an integral part of Ceri Richards' painting. An accomplished musician himself, he has used the evocative qualities of Debussy's music to create these marvellous designs. Their intensity exists on many levels. Art springs from conflict, and the conflict here is between two eternities, that of the sea assimilating all things into its movement towards ultimate oblivion and that of the cathedral embodying man's faith and mind, sinking through time, only to reassert its weight and magnetic force.

Light spills over into darkness to reveal images of

unforgettable wonder. Bases of columns, submerged hieroglyphs, twisted metal inlaid with precious stones, discs and spangles used by the sea to its blind, unconscious ends, the sonorous shadow of plunging architecture guiding its treasures to an inaccessible grave, all these reconstitute the cathedral, and with it the imagination of a man. That is only one interpretation. The exquisite colour and delicacy of these productions are no less astonishing than the massive weight of their effect. They are elusive, but they are also central. A great artist has saved them for us. These parts of a vision which the sea has separated and moved towards dissolution have been salvaged and welded together by his controlling hand.

"The Joy of Creation"  
The Listener, April 30, 1964, 720-721

The title of this piece as it appears in The Listener was bestowed upon it by the BBC. Watkins called it "Problems of Communication," for he wished to say something practical about the differences, and links, between poetry, music and painting.

In the last paragraph of this piece Watkins deplores the current reaction against permanence in art, the emphasis on effect rather than meaning. Pessimistic as he sounds there, it is unlikely that he foresaw that, shortly after his death, critics would refer to his poetry as "too timeless."

### The Joy of Creation

I am concerned with the links between poetry, music, and the visual arts. A poem, a piece of music, a carving or a painting, when it makes a profound impression on the imagination, takes possession not only of the senses but of the unconscious mind. The poem, for example, may have an obsessive power for days, causing itself to be repeated over and over again, always with inexhaustible effect. This will go on until the conscious mind is occupied with other things. Even then, the unconscious mind retains it and will bring it to the surface at intervals in the future.

In a work of music, melody has the same effect, and the recurrent power of melody returns at unpredictable moments, possessing the imagination. An accident of circumstance or of natural surroundings, an association of landscape with a poet perhaps may bring a line of verse to mind, but the recurrence of melody seems to obey an almost precise mathematical law, like the expanding ripples from a stone flung in a pool. The exterior world interferes with that law, as wind might interfere with those ripples, but only slightly. Their operation is from the interior world of the imagination, from the stone it has dropped. Such is the aural power of art.

In the visual arts, although there must be the same precision in the unconscious mind, there is not the same exactness of re-perception away from the work. A painting alters, however slightly, in the memory; a masterpiece alters; and the sight of it after a lapse of time combines the shock of recognition with

an adjustment to the disturbing secret of its power. There is challenge and counter-challenge in its contemplation.

If we turn from the effect of a work of art to its genesis, we find a paradoxical situation. The imagination is solitary, and yet, in its potential, holds the attention of millions. It is remembering and expectant at once, as it waits on the unpredictable. The artist is solitary, but the need of communication does exist, even for the most solitary of artists. So Milton, when he was overtaken by blindness, spoke of 'that one talent which is death to hide.' A poet does not only address a living audience; equally he addresses the dead and the unborn. When Blake found that nobody would publish his works he was not dismayed. He said that those works were the constant study of archangels, that they were 'published elsewhere,' and 'beautifully bound.'

Just as an artist needs his art to complete his life, so, too, he needs an audience or witness to hear and see it. By giving definition, thought and feeling, he demands a response: once the work is finished, the need of communication exists.

A work will not wholly communicate itself unless the need of communication is banished. If the attention of the artist is intercepted by that need, the work will be incomplete. The position, then, is this: an artist is aware of the need to communicate, and aware that this need is a precious thing, but he can only meet that need by resisting it while the imagination is at work. Only by attending to one tension alone, one work and one witness, can the artist make the right preparation for the need

of the many, of perhaps all.

In every genuine artist the first care is to use his gift in such a way as to satisfy his imaginative need. If the whole world applauds a work and it does not meet this need, the work, from the point of view of the artist, is a failure. A shallow artist is disenheartened by failure, but a profound one is more likely to be disenheartened by success.

Art must have something of the bounty, and waste, and irregularity of life itself. Its growth is of a paradoxical kind. It may die of too much attention, and it may thrive by oppression; it may turn to the sun, but only to cast a shadow not found on any sundial. Its direction is more intricate than the direction of wind or plough, and its seasons travel across time in a different cycle. The one constant offered to the mind is unity within the possibilities of form, and this is what determines the artist's or poet's choice, the outline of his work. It is impossible to pay too much attention to form, which is the vehicle of communication; but form itself must wait upon luck to make it live; it is always an accident which gives permanence. It is this, giving unity and density at once, which enables the work to renew itself centuries later.

I am convinced that the foundation of art is joy. In the visual arts, in poetry and in music, the act of creation is joy. This is true whether the work is tragic or gay or even bitter. The tragedies of Shakespeare are full of joy, reaching its highest expression. Certainly this creative joy is of a unique kind. One might think that the artists who are given it



should be happy, but often they are not. There is a tension between their own values and those of the world, there is often poverty, there is the failure to satisfy the demands of the imagination, then the arid spaces between one work and another, the gulf between desire and achievement. Yet, in spite of these, in the act of creative work an artist is, and always has been, drawing from joy.

A picture, like any work of art, is an interpretation of life. Life is a miracle, and art becomes a miracle when it is a perfect refraction of life. There must be a refraction of life for art to exist, a stylization or synthesis, of you like, of living experience. The more extreme the refraction, the more abstract art becomes; but the elements of life are still in the artist's pencil or brush. A photograph comes from the retina of the camera, an abstract picture from the retina of the mind. Before the invention of the camera, the communication of detail and of exact likeness, particularly in portraiture, had a narrative and historical value: the painter or sculptor was the visual historian of the age. That was only his subordinate role. In a great master his idiom as artist always predominated over his subject. Now the necessity of the subordinate role has disappeared, and the artist has greater freedom of choice and of emphasis in the realm of form. In many visual artists the necessity of narrative has given way to the manipulation of motive forces, and to the excitement of form itself.

Appreciation of the past is not enough; alone, it breeds nothing but imitation. Only a complete vision, of past and

present, makes a work robust; a nostalgic style is the mark of the amateur. Those who have built tradition have always begun by challenging it; their work at first seemed revolutionary. The miraculous moment of composition occurs where tradition and innovation meet.

It is true that the necessity of communicating has been the germ of superlative works of art. Mozart, on his way to Prague for the first performance of Don Giovanni, was able in a garden to compose unforgettable arias. Music has many examples where the invitation of performance drew from the composer works which might not have existed without that prompting and which it is difficult to imagine altered or surpassed. Music cannot indeed be separated from the idea of performance in the way that poetry can: its very composition is identified with instruments and players. Only in dramatic poetry is there an instant demand of such resources, a demand which Shakespeare, like Mozart, could meet at a moment's notice. Lyric poetry, which need not consider performance, is concerned with the kind of truth of which every performance or recital can only be an imperfect copy, as it sings its way down the generations.

Performance, then, the public form of communication, which is an opportunity to the composer of music, is a hindrance to the poet. His preoccupation must remain with the secrecy of his material, the voice or articulation speaking from the subject obsessing him, of which all reproduction is only an echo. Yet that secondary thing, the reading aloud of a poem, will reproduce the period of composition and its excitement, however imperfectly.

Such performance is nearly always disappointing to the poet himself.

In spite of this, and whatever the ingenuities of topography, poetry is written for no other purpose than to be read aloud or sung. He who looks at a poem without hearing it in his head is only half reading it. He is only receiving the poem's shape and its utility as information. If a piece of music were played by a silent orchestra, it could still be heard through a score; and the lines of a poem are such a score. They are utterance, whether read aloud or not.

Of all the arts, the most immediate in its power to communicate is the dance. It is also the art in which, more than any other, performance may surpass all that was preconceived. In music, there is a momentary delay between its execution and the response. In the visual arts, painting, sculpture, architecture, although the impact is direct its true reception is gradual and complex, for it operates on many levels. The painting, the carving, or the building makes its first impact as an arrangement by the artist, but this is almost at once related to the artist's other work, to his country, to the kind of sensibility he possesses. It makes a simultaneous impact as an event in the history of art, a qualification or restatement of tradition. Only gradually, after being seen again and again, does it establish a distinct identity, except in the eyes of a child.

What happened when, after Michelangelo's labours, the doors of the Sistine Chapel were opened? Was anyone among those who entered able to seize more than a fraction of the imaginative

power displayed there? Was even the single design of a figure wholly accessible? Yet, when a work of art is released, its first impact will always be significant, however much this may be corrected later by seeing or hearing it again. The audience or public may be mistaken, but they cannot be deceived. There may have been many instances in the past of works of genius finding at first a hostile response on all sides, but the vehemence of that response has usually indicated a recognition of their power, and a fear of conforming to it. Often an artist speaks to a generation beyond his own. As Ezra Pound has said, 'Artists are the antennae of the race.'

It seems to me that in our age there is, except in the finest poets and artists, a much greater understanding of effect, and particularly of initial effect, than of permanence. Permanence itself is suspect in the eyes and minds of many artists, as they believe that all is flux. This is only half true. Wherever intuitive truth is manifested, though the work be hundreds or thousands of years old, eternity is present, and the dead artist who made it is revealed as our contemporary. A supreme work of art is able to persuade us that it is drawn from a timeless source, that it has existed forever, and that it is we, who believed in the fugitive nature of time, who were deceived.

"David Jones"

Catalog Arddangosfa Celfyddyd a Chrefft (Abertawe: Eisteddfod Genedlaethol Frenhinol Cymru, Awst 1964), 1

Watkins knew David Jones fairly well, visiting him in London occasionally. He had admired Jones very much ever since the publication of In Parenthesis, and was hailing him as a Blakean figure at least ten years before the critics began to do so.

## David Jones

Certain artists fall into a period which reflects an age or a fashion, and their excellence is in a sense historical. Others use history as a tool in their hands and so manipulate it that their work extends far beyond the province of their age and becomes applicable to all ages. The work of David Jones belongs to the second category. The history of one man's experience, if intensely recorded, contains the history of the race.

Wales is to-day honouring an artist who has already honoured her. Half-Welsh by birth, David Jones has exhibited in his two great books In Parenthesis and The Anathemata a technique where power and delicacy serve each other, and, by strictness of cadence, obey a controlling vision. One property of this vision is to see as contemporary what is ancient and to see as ancient what is before his eyes. It is a religious vision projecting a symbolic art, and through this art, whether in literature, painting or drawing, shines his love of man and of all that is precious to him, and a particular love of Wales and these islands drawn from the roots of earliest customs and ways of living.

David Jones was already famous in his native art of painting and drawing before he became a writer. Now he has achieved worldwide distinction in two arts, and there are few such examples in Britain before him. Blake is one. Blake said: "Everything that lives is holy." He might also have said what David Jones wrote in The Tutelar of the Place a few years ago, with his eyes fixed on the removal of things and places whose existence and tradition seemed sacred to him: "Save us from the men who plan."

Foreword to The Golden Age and Dream Days by Kenneth Grahame  
New York: The New American Library, 1964, vii-xv

As this introduction shows, Watkins knew children very well, partially because he so carefully observed his own five offspring and partially because (as he says of Grahame) in one level of his consciousness he never grew up. The world was as full of wonder for him at sixty-one as it had been in his childhood. Just as Grahame's characters must have truces with "the Olympians," the adults, Watkins' job at the bank was a truce with the "real world," which was no realer to him than the table discussion of social events was to Grahame's children.

Foreword to The Golden Age and Dream Days  
by Kenneth Grahame

Nothing is so deceptive as childhood, no other part of our lives so misleading to our understanding, so paradoxically true. We are in a position to be corrected on every point of reason, to be restrained wherever we go from the paths of obedience and imitation. Gifted with fiery enthusiasm and perceptions of boundless wonder, we run naked until aged ignorance, as in Blake's drawing, clips our wings. We have all the greedy vices in miniature, but we forgive quickly and are forgiven, and the kingdom of heaven is ours.

While we are children we are not at all concerned with ourselves; we simply are. We exist as hostages on the hinterland of consciousness, won over at at any moment by favour and love. When we are not won over, when we are left to our own devices, we enter a jungle of fear and illusion, delight and savagery, moving in a tapestry that is prepared for us by nature, our movements prompted perhaps by a musician's fingers, but certainly by the children of all the countless generations that have gone before. The stories we have heard from the cradle give us plot and character; they serve our need to impersonate, and with their help we pull down conventional time and re-establish the Middle Ages. Enemies are almost as important to us as friends, for valour cannot exist without antagonism, so they must be invented where they are lacking, and we find ourselves acting parts. We cannot always triumph against impossible odds but must, sometimes, be the odds ourselves, for fairness completes the ritual; without



without it the pattern is spoilt. Monotony is the common enemy of enemies and friends alike: in a right ritual everyone is to die. Only on these terms does each come to life continually, as the parts alternate, in an immortal present.

The exuberance of childhood is in keeping with the marvellous world around it. The sun and trees, grass and flowers, insects and fishes, are seen, not by the aesthetic sense, but by the first wonder, which accepts them as gifts. Their presence is immediate, not made distant by the intervention of time, as in the subtle contemplation of youth. When children reflect, they become involved in a deeper mystery than thought could possibly unravel or truly penetrate, so much more does their unconscious mind know than they do, so ancient are the sources to which they have access, behind the sophistication of time.

Certain writers are endowed with the power to reenter the world of children at will, as though they had never left it. They still carry a key to time which is for others irretrievably lost, whether they would like to regain it or not. They turn the key, and instantly the anarchic forces of childhood are let loose in a revolution of the senses. Hans Anderson possessed this key; so did Lewis Carroll, Walter de la Mare, and Kenneth Grahame, each using it in a different way. All Hans Anderson's children are mature, and Lewis Carroll's one child is surrounded by maturity in a distorted logic. De la Mare and Grahame, on the other hand, have only to stop still for the whole of their childhood to rush past and encompass them. It is as though, in a certain level of their consciousness, they had

never grown up. The joy of children was for de la Mare set against the sinister in nature and the transience of time, of which he was so acutely aware; but for Kenneth Grahame the division from the adult world was absolute, and all the sensuous forces of immaturity mustered against it.

One cannot for a moment accept The Golden Age and Dream Days as children's books. If they are found in the juvenile section of a library, they are mistakenly placed there. In the matter of language alone they are well above the heads of children of the age described in their pages, written as they are in the allusive, florid style of a Latin scholar. And what older child is interested in the myth-making of his younger contemporaries? Children to whom the style is intelligible have already transferred their interests and affections to the world of grown-ups, against whom those younger participants continually make war. If, on the other hand, these two books were to be found on a shelf just below Paradise Lost, that might be acceptable to their author, if not to us.

The indescribable charm of the books hangs on two threads. The first is the total re-enactment of a lost world, of a sensibility we have outgrown, with all its dramatic poise and expectation. The second is fantasy. This second thread is stretched to comic exaggeration in the manner of children, but the first is exact and holds the narrative as a rope holds a sail. An odd dimension of the narrative is that the children are attending school and reluctantly progressing in their lessons as the book moves on, marginal though these are to their life

and interest. Lewis Carroll fits his Looking-Glass characters into a chessboard with mathematical precision, but Kenneth Grahame solves the problems of the incongruity of adult life by instinct. Life itself has taught him the grief and ecstasy of children, who are, like himself, displaced persons; their lightning changes of mood, of which he is so profound and unerring a master, are better understood by him than by those other writers of childhood whose fantasy is more original. He turns his coloured world of humdrum situations into exquisite patterns, held only so long as the child's mood lasts, or until that throbbing, eager life is checked by the stern intrusion of an alien, adult power.

How many poets have looked back to childhood and been unable to describe it! That part of it which they appropriate to their poetry is usually placed, like a lodestar or a bell-buoy, to answer a particular instinct of return. It is true that only a part of life belongs to art, but the elflike, or angelic, aspect of childhood is incomplete unless it is supported, as in Blake and Shakespeare, by a true apprehension of the nature of a child. Dylan Thomas evokes childhood powerfully because so many of its moods are at his fingertips: he loves the good and bad behaviour of children at the same time. In Chaucer the whole of life is restored by the least hint.

Kenneth Grahame writes prose of poetic effect, though not of poetic content. The poetry underlying these books is a poetry of change and is only brought to the surface by the expertise of his manner. This is revealed in many of his descriptive passages.

In every episode of Dream Days--and the book is a series of separate stories connected by the continuing thread of the lives of the same children--the gulf between the values and preoccupations of the grown-ups, who are referred to as Olympians, and those of the children is emphasized and clearly defined. There is no possibility of reconciliation between the two states of mind, the adult and the young--only brief moments of forgiveness; mutual understanding is out of the question. These small fallen angels, unlike those colourless angels in Victorian picture-books for which they have such contempt, flung like Satan to the nether-world of table-legs, conspire indefatigably to free themselves from their chains and move irresistably towards triumph and a vindication of their own rights. The cohorts of the good angels are conspicuous only for their tact and discretion.

It must be said at once that the activity of these lawless children, who are so law-abiding according to their own code of honour and behaviour, is convincing, in a way in which a political conference or a Stock Exchange report is not. One emerges from the pages of these books with the conviction that children have won the day. Their reign may be brief, but they have successors in every generation who take up the equipment they have dropped. In relation to man's threescore years and ten they are forever outnumbered seven to one by adults, but such a proportion is necessary to their sense of heroism. The aloofness of the Olympians leaves them free to conduct their own guerilla warfare, and every successful skirmish against monotony belongs to a

silent campaign whose trophies are the more precious for having been won against odds. Ultimate victory, even if it were possible, does not matter. They are concerned only with the present and with magnanimous death, the flourish of a distant, heroic end.

Such, I believe, are the conclusions drawn by the author, and there is no question as to which side has his sympathy. Kenneth Grahame is always aware of the division of forces between childhood and maturity and of its apparent unfairness. The children, although his protagonists, are usually more pre-occupied with their own conflicts, and these are projected with marvellous dexterity.

At one point Harold and the narrator are brought into conflict. The Olympians had again failed to fulfill their promises, and the two children are seen in reaction to disappointment. The younger recovers more quickly:

One wild outburst--one dissolution of a minute into his original elements of air and water, of tears and outcry--so much insulted nature claimed....

If the gods are ever grateful to man for anything, it is when he is so good as to display a short memory. The Olympians were never slow to recognize this quality of Harold's, in which, indeed, their salvation lay, and on this occasion their gratitude had taken the form of a fine, fat orange, tough-rinded as oranges of those days were wont to be. This he had eviscerated in the good old-fashioned manner, by biting out a hole in the shoulder, inserting a lump of sugar therein, and then working it cannily till the whole soul and body of the orange passed glorified into his being. Thereupon, filled full of orange juice and iniquity, he conceived a deadly snare. Having deftly patted and squeezed the orange-skin till it resumed its original shape, he filled it up with water, inserted a fresh lump of sugar in the orifice, and, issuing forth, blandly proffered it to me as I sat moodily in the doorway dreaming of strange wild circuses under tropic skies....

Unthinkingly I grasped the golden fraud, which collapsed at my touch and squirted its contents into my eyes and over my collar, till the nethermost parts of me were damp with the water that had run down my neck. In an instant I had Harold down, and with all the energy of which I was capable, devoted myself into grinding his head into the gravel; while he, realizing that the closure was applied and that the time for discussion of argument was past, sternly concentrated his powers on kicking me in the stomach.

The reaction of the more resilient child in blinding himself to old disaster with the design of a new, petty triumph, is no less true than the author's vulnerable persistence in his dark brooding in the doorway and the clouding of his usually sharp observation. There is a terrifying clarity, not only in the collision of the two moods, but in the dissipation of their conflict:

Some people can never allow events to work themselves out quietly. At this juncture one of Them swooped down on the scene, pouring shrill, misplaced abuse on both of us: on me for ill-treating my younger brother, whereas it was distinctly I who was the injured and the deceived; on him for the high offence of assault and battery on a clean collar-- a collar which I had myself deflowered and defaced shortly before, in sheer desperate ill-temper. Disgusted and defiant, we fled in different directions, rejoining each other in the kitchen-garden; and as we strolled along together, our short feud forgotten, Harold observed, gloomily: "I should like to be a cave-man, like Uncle George was tellin' us about, with a flint hatchet and no clothes, and live in a cave and not know anybody!"

It is not easy to say how often the author uses his small characters to voice his own indignation and despair, so skillfully does he use the mask of tender ridicule, but the Prologue to The Golden Age, the earlier of these two books, has all the force of a personal statement:

It was incessant matter for amazement how these Olympians would talk over our heads--during meals, for instance--of this or the other social inanity, under the delusions that these pale phantasms of reality were among the importances of life. We illuminati, eating silently, our heads full of plans and conspiracies, could have told them what real life was. We had just left

it outside, and we were all on fire to get back to it. Of course we didn't waste the revelation on them; the futility of imparting our ideas had long been demonstrated. One in thought and purpose, linked by the necessity of combatting one hostile fate, a power antagonistic ever--a power we lived to evade--we had no confidants save ourselves. This strange anaemic order of beings was further removed from us, in fact, than the kindly beasts who shared our natural existence in the sun. The estrangement was fortified by an abiding sense of injustice, arising from the refusal of the Olympians ever to defend, retract, or admit themselves in the wrong, or to accept similar concessions on our part...

Well! The Olympians are all past and gone. Somehow the sun does not seem to shine as brightly as it used; the trackless meadows of old time have shrunk and dwindled away to a few poor acres. A saddening doubt, a dull suspicion, creeps over me. Et in Arcadia ego--I certainly did once inhabit Arcady. Can it be that I have also become an Olympian?

There speaks the deprived and displaced child, lacking the nourishment of parental love, for all such children brought up by indifferent aunts and uncles, who were, are, or ever shall be. They rightly engage our compassion, living as they do without understanding the poignancy of their situation and displaying so much courage in one episode after another.

It is not so much the loss of happiness, which was never perhaps completely his, that Kenneth Grahame regrets, as the loss of vitality. Wilfred Owen's lines,

But the old unhappiness is returning,  
Boys' griefs are not so grievous as youth's yearning;  
Boys have no sadness sadder than our hope

do not exactly answer his complaint. The intensity of a lifetime is, for Grahame, contracted in all its most brilliant colours into the years before puberty. After this there is only anticlimax, before it only the infant years of initiation. For him what T. S. Eliot writes is true:

Ridiculous the waste sad time

## Stretching before and after.

In all his writing, so true to immature emotions and drenched in the beauty of sunlit nature, it can never be forgotten that this abounding torrent of warmth, colour, humour, indignation, and love, delighting the characters that leap and play in it, is prompted by adversity and neglect. He knew this, as he confesses in his Prologue:

Looking back to those days of old, ere the gate was shut to behind me, I can see now that to children with a proper equipment of parents these things would have worn a different aspect.

Yet the relationships of the children to each other are valid, and the children themselves robust, as though the lack of parental protection had taught them to fortify themselves and had brought them closer to wild nature--and, incidentally, closer to each other--than a more affectionate upbringing might have done. The little boy who is the author has an envy of his elder brother, Edward, mixed with admiration, for Edward is so much nearer to romance and the marital affections, that very background of which they both have been deprived. The necessity of establishing a permanent relation with a member of the other sex is urgent to him, and that distant possibility seen through the eyes of the child recurs again and again, always in fantastic terms. His actual encounters with little girls are charming and true to life, but ephemeral, and his estrangement comes home to him during what he calls "the gloomy period of church-time, with its enforced inaction and its lack of real interest":

Naturally the eye, wandering here and there among the serried ranks, made bold, untrammelled choice among our fair fellow-suplicants. It was in this way that, some months



earlier, under the exceptional strain of the Athanasian Creed, my roving fancy had settled upon the baker's wife as a fit object for a life-long devotion. Her riper charms had conquered a heart which none of her be-muslined, tittering juniors had been able to subdue; and that she was already wedded had never occurred to me as any bar to my affection.

Everywhere the lack of inherited happiness and the treasure of happiness found by the wayside is vividly portrayed. The appeal of this April world is perennial, and the charm of the writing wonderfully sustained. That particular golden age has gone, and neither book could be written to-day; but there lies in both a challenge to the adult conscience and a manifesto it cannot afford to ignore. The truth of Wordsworth's reperception of childhood, or of Traherne's, is not in any way reduced by the animation of these wilder children of whom Grahame writes with inward certainty, but Grahame gives weight and body to the imagination and elicits a compassionate response and a sense of shame by his declaration of a child's independence. Maturity can have a greater maturity and love, as the best poets teach; but only by a deeper understanding of children, and by love of them, can the adult mind steer a true course. That body and that weight which the mind has displaced are as necessary to it as its hull and its displacement are to a ship.

"New Year 1965"

The Listener, LXXIII, 1867 (January 7, 1965), 22-23

Save that it is more formally expressed, this talk is very like Watkins' usual conversation. His mind moved effortlessly, mysteriously, from topic to unrelated topic, but basically he spoke only of two things: Wales, her people, land and sea, and customs; and art, its purpose and composition, and the writers, painters and musicians who produced it. Anything else (for he did not speak often of his religious beliefs) was mere elaboration.

The discovery of an elderly skeleton known as the Red Lady of Paviland had a fascination for Watkins that was out of proportion to its archaeological significance. As he recalls in Fidelities (pages 84-88), the workers at the site near his home allowed him to assist with the sifting, which he found immensely exciting and fulfilling, for the discovery of long-buried objects represented for him a victory over time. He loved any little object he salvaged from the beach, a bone, a net, a fossil. He especially cherished a round stone about the size of a plum, which had a tiny fossil embedded in the top; his poem "The Crinoid" is about this unlovely object, which he would endlessly turn over in his hands.

Watkins regarded the sea with horrified fascination. He knew its designs upon him: "It fears and hates me. I know too much about it." Compare the third paragraph of this talk to this stanza from page 82 of Affinities:

Ocean, kindler of us, mover and mother,  
Assailing the rock with variety of music,  
Inconstancy of pattern, eternally renewing  
Through mother-of-pearl the colours of destruction...

1965

New Year 1965

A year, a ring of time, has been completed. To travel is to break the circle. New Year's Day is the beginning of a journey, so it is full of uncertainty and adventurous excitement.

I have sometimes asked myself why a wide expanse of water like the Bristol Channel, which I see from the cliff where I live, is more satisfying to the mind and to the eye than it seems when travelling across it, however exhilarating that may be. Then I feel only part of the circle, and the thread of the ship is like the thread of argument in a book whose end I cannot see. I may have an anthology of poems on board, or a prose book, and these are enough to reel out, like a fishing-line, from one side of the ship to the other; their tension is felt as I move along. But on shore, if I look out across the water, no such tackle will do. Why not? Is it that I disagree with the argument, that I find all anthologies incomplete, or simply that my mind instinctively rejects what may disturb it? Surely not this, for nothing could be more disturbing than that treacherous water. I have seen it in so many moods, and I wonder if anyone knows more intimately than I do the rocks and stones, inlets and gullies of this part of the Gower coast, and certain caves where the sea tosses planks and logs and grinds the rusted ironworks of ships, year after year, a little deeper into the sand.

Yet sometimes I have seen it, after a stormy night, vast, yet immediate, containing all its contradictions, all its opposing forces, in a single harmonious vision. I have never doubted the

terror, even the malice, of the sea's designs; but to see it in a moment of repose is mysterious and supremely satisfying. Water, the source of life, the life-giver, in eternal movement, the perfect mirror, the silent interpreter of death and change, compels both eye and mind with its endless fascination. It was this that made Rimbaud write:

Elle est retrouvée!  
 Quoi? L'Eternité,  
 C'est la mer mêlée  
 Au soleil.

A very rough translation of this would be:

It is refound!  
 What? Eternity.  
 It is the bond  
 Of sun with sea.

It is true that if I am looking for the roots of a country I must turn my eyes away from that image of unity, resolved in its perpetual movement, the sea of dissolution and beginning, the serpent swallowing its own tail. I must look away even from that cave only a few miles away from here where the oldest skeleton found in Britain was unearthed, that of a young man known as the Red Lady of Paviland because of the red ochre from the rock deposits surrounding him, which archaeologists had mistaken for the deep colours of the ritual dyes in the burial of a bride. I must forget the perfect, unblemished mirror, and see what man has made. It is necessary to dig the past up to understand the present, but all good artists have something ancient about them, too, and the earliest trinkets and ornaments dug from Welsh clay may jostle against the work of a living contemporary who has looked on that mirror and then set his hand to his task. Even in the sixteenth

century there was a fashion to praise only the sculpture of a vanished civilization; and did not Micelangelo carve and bury a statue among the excavations, first breaking off an arm, to show, when it was found and hailed as a masterpiece, that the greatest sculptor was alive?

I was already living on the cliff before the war, and I remember coming home very late on the last night of the year 1938. It was just before midnight, and I caught the sound of a broadcast of the Mari Lwyd ceremony which was coming from my father's old home at Taff's Well: that ceremony, traditional in Wales, in which a horse's skull was carried from house to house in the last night of the year by a party of singers, wits and impromptu poets, usually the worse for drink, who challenged the inmates to a rhyming contest, and, if they won, claimed entry and the right to food and ale. As I listened, it seemed to me that the old custom assumed terrifying proportions, for not only drunken and holy people, but the dead themselves, seemed to have come to the house. This, too, was a kind of reconciliation of contraries, an eternal moment of contradictions, and my 'Ballad of the Mari Lwyd' began to take shape. Three years later it was to give the title to my first book.

The last night of the year is, then, for me a night of great mystery, even when it breaks into the chiming of the clock and the noise of the bells that announce the New Year. After this, all is lost in greetings and tumultuous singing. The ritual of the Mari Lwyd disappears, and gay processions and dancing take its place. But before all is expectation and the movement of time to its climax, the movement of the refrain to my ballad:

Midnight. Midnight. Midnight.  
Hark at the hands of the clock.

The horse's skull, then, became the image of the Old Year which I needed, the image of New Year's Eve.

New Year's Day is the day of greeting, and I should look for an image to interpret this, too, but I cannot find one. A happy new year is the best thing in the world, and it rests always on a miracle; for what constitutes happiness? I have seen children playing in a garden full of beautiful flowers and shrubs on a perfect summer day, but their pleasure was derived from a number of dirty planks and two old wheels which they had managed to put together and were dragging around by a rope. That is as it should be, for how can even the most beautiful gifts rival the enjoyment which we make for ourselves out of almost nothing? Yet gifts are not to be despised, and perfection itself is always a lucky thing. The way to perfection may be crooked, and Yeats makes a character say in one of his poems:

An aimless joy is a pure joy,  
and he goes on to say:

And wisdom is a butterfly  
And not a gloomy bird of prey.

When I met Yeats in 1938 in Dublin he was in the last year of his life, and he talked a good deal about the stubborn nature of poetry, about the 'damned hard work,' as William Morris called it, which it took to get a poem right. Yeats's lyrical gift became subtler and richer as he aged, and he was at this time writing the greatest poems of his life, but he talked mainly about the struggle with language; 'and then,' he said, 'perhaps when you

least expect it, you get the luck.' First of all he would make a prose draft, and then move it into a lyrical shape, until slowly, sometimes chanting the lines all through the night, he had arrived at the purest form of his thought, its most direct and muscular expression. At last the whole poem would come together in a moment, like the click of a box, as he once described it. It was, however, Yeats's insistence on miracle and on revelation that was most emphasized in that afternoon's conversation. He disliked what he called 'mechanical apathy,' which deadened a race and made people lose their awareness. Everything he valued was a miracle, and he particularly cherished those characters who exhibited a heroic attitude to life and death.

Yeats was seventy-three when he died, seven months before the outbreak of war, and this year will mark the centenary of his birth. He foresaw the war, and a great deal of its suffering, clearly, and his last poems are affirmations in spite of tragedy and ruin. Their fabric is what he called 'tragic joy,' and the last poems of Dylan Thomas, in their different way, have the same kind of affirmation. It is in one of Yeats's last poems, 'Lapis Lazuli,' after describing the vanished carvings of Callimachus, that he wrote:

His long lamp-chimney shaped like the stem  
Of a slender palm, stood but a day;  
All things fall and are built again  
And those that build them again are gay.

And Dylan Thomas in his poem for his thirty-fifth birthday wrote:

Heaven that never was  
Nor will be ever is always true,  
And, in that brambled void,  
Plenty as blackberries in the woods  
The dead grow for His joy.

The artist is a maker. He makes, in response to something deeper than himself. He does not know where he is going, any more than the children dragging planks about in the garden; but he knows that he must use the materials that he is given. And T. S. Eliot has written in 'Ash Wednesday':

Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something  
Upon which to rejoice.

So far as time is concerned, I think poets and artists differ from so many others in that their consciousness and will move upstream rather than down. Their eyes are directed to the source rather than to the estuary, so they see all that had vigorous life in the past as contemporary with ourselves, and ourselves as falling away from that, if we do not correct our vision. I think of a wonderful old poet who, on the last night of the year, twelve years ago, mixed up his figures and wished everyone a happy 1593. That was one of the most inspired mistakes I have ever heard, and the poet had the good sense not to correct it. If he left us with an illusion, it was the kind of illusion that makes great works possible, and their enjoyment complete. A poet is not a reporter, unless he is a reporter of eternal truths, and the first characteristic of a masterpiece is not that it is new, but that it has always existed and only just been found.

The New Year is inevitably linked with its predecessor. Its first duty is to record the events of the old year, and these are allotted a special place in a page of the Times. All of these do not interest us, but some do, and certainly the year cannot go



irresponsibly forward without first taking hold of this baton of the past. Once it is accepted, the right provision is made for whatever change may come. The runner is not disqualified.

It may be thought that I dwell too much on the past, that my year does not move forward at all, but rather back. I am concerned with poets, living and dead, and there must be many who do not share my preoccupation. I can only say that if poets are, as Shelley suggested, 'the trumpets which sing to battle' and 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world,' they have a lot to answer for, and are worth some study. Besides, it is the difficulty of handling words in their most exact and intense form, and for me those who overcome this difficulty hold a key to life and to time. The old year 1694 marked the fourth centenary of the death of Michelangelo and of the birth of Shakespeare, and their works will still be immediate when the new year is past, and when new centuries are past, because truth itself has an unrivalled freshness and power.

Before I wish you a happy 1695, however, I should tell you something about 1694. Just as that old poet reminded us that America had been discovered, I should like to add that I went there last year, and went there for the first time. But I must not digress from my theme which insists on the value of people rather than of places; and yet I must not talk about the people I met, since I cannot, in a short space, do them justice.

The French poet Paul Valery said that travel was no use to him because he had seen all other countries in the little fishing town of the Mediterranean on which he first opened his eyes. The

Mediterranean was his birthright, just as Heine's was the Rhine. Valery's travel or Heine's long exile in Paris, where he died, could not change this. Heine used to remark in exile that it was pointless for France and Germany to quarrel over the Rhine, since his cradle had swung above it and it belonged to him. And Valery, wherever he went, only recognized what, from his first vision of life, he already knew; he saw only the brilliant light and colour of the sea and of the fishing-boats, and the mysterious colours under water, the blood of the tunnies mingling with the sea. Those first impressions of the Mediterranean into which, he claimed, the traditions of every race had been poured, obliterated everything else, and dominated what was to come. All harbours and all civilizations began and ended at the bridges of his eyes. The graveyard by the sea belonged to every continent of the world.

I like travel, and I like to travel slowly, so I go by sea and land. The roots of a country may be touched as intimately through distance as through propinquity. In places far from here I have found Wales, just as here, now that I am back in Wales, I find other countries; and, unlike Paul Valery, I should not have been able to find them here, had I not been so far. In Wales I first read Auden, Marianne Moore, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Lowell. In America I saw them, and in Wales I read them again. I am always a beginner; and that is why, after travelling, I like to return to this cliff. And it is from this cliff that I now wish everyone a happy---yes, 1965.

"On T. S. Eliot"

This short commentary on Eliot, whom Watkins knew through Faber and Faber, was written for a television show entitled "The Direct Eyes." This was a memorial program presented shortly after Eliot's death, on January 10, 1965.

## On T. S. Eliot

Eliot was always conscious of the moment of death. 'We are born with the dead,' he says in Little Gidding, and again in The Dry Salvages: 'And the time of death is every moment.'

He was full of gaiety and humour. You could not imagine a more sympathetic and responsive person. He knew all about despair: he had explored it to the utmost. And he was wholly dedicated to life. He was prepared to help anyone who wanted help, and to give himself as completely as he could.

The excitement of Eliot's early poems, when they came out after the first World War, was revolutionary. Yeats called him the most revolutionary man in poetry in his lifetime, and he was right. Eliot caught, brilliantly and exactly, the details of people's lives in a city, and, with his faultless ear, made them unforgettable. Suddenly everyone was quoting this new poetry; it spread like Asian 'flu, and became part of our experience. It was impossible to separate London from the evocative echoes of his work. It was impossible for any poet to escape his influence.

This influence was liberating and constricting at the same time. Eliot had broken up the formal rhythm and rhyme of regular stanzas for the sake of a new music corresponding more closely to the movement of life. He substituted an often irregular line of his own, its cadence depending on speech rhythms and the demands of his subject. He accepted everyday life as material for poetry; he banished artificial poetic diction, and tested a poem by one thing only: 'Is it genuine?'

That was liberating and fair enough. Everyone started writing

realistic poems in a looser form, out of genuine experience, and everyone was surprised to find that they were not at all like Eliot's. Therein lay the constriction. The miracle of putting down everyday life in unforgettable terms had been performed, but it could not be repeated by others. Eliot's technique--and technique is always linked with belief--was such that a thousand readings could not exhaust the poem's meaning or its charm.

I remember him saying to me that the poetry of Four Quartets was better poetry than the poetry of The Waste Land; but he didn't repudiate his early work. In form he never repeated himself, but he continually recreated himself in each poem, and without the early poetry, the late, in which his lyric power reached its greatest heights, would not have been possible.

I think his influence will always be immediate, and not retrospective, and that is the mark of a great poet. Critics think in terms of decades, poets in terms of centuries. I believe that in whatever century Eliot's work is accessible, his influence will be immediate, and its effect profound.

Who can better teach how little is visible  
 Save in the eye of God?  
 Tentatively you struggled,  
 Mapping slowly the land we know.

"The Poetry of Wilfred Owen"  
 Unpublished essay, 1967 version

While this paper was never published, Watkins found it very useful, reading it at Oxford and using it as lecture material at both Swansea and Seattle. He had wanted to publish it, with "The Translation of Poetry," "W. B. Yeats--the Religious Poet," and a projected paper on Holderlin, as a Faber paperback, but T. S. Eliot felt the essays too heterogeneous to be printed together. Therefore Watkins never seriously revised this paper beyond bringing it up to date in certain respects. The present text, while it contains references to the most recent edition of Owen, is really the 1936 original text with a few recent paragraphs and interlineations.

Watkins' enthusiasm for Owen's poetry was at its height when he began this essay, probably while still at Cambridge, and there are excesses in it that the mature poet would not have made; but he never stopped liking Owen. If he over-estimated him, it was for the best of reasons: for his essential seriousness, for his repudiation of the Kipling-Brooke sort of poetic trash, and for his experiments in form and sound. Owen's poetry did not have any effect on Watkins', unless it were during an early period before Watkins began publishing. Certainly Watkins' extraordinary war poetry owes nothing to Owen except that it may have been Owen's example that led him to experiment.

### The Poetry of Wilfred Owen

Do not look for a poet's *raison d'etre* in his biography, for you are bound to be baffled. The favourable or unfavourable circumstances of childhood all contribute to the picture, and the circumstances in which the grown man finds himself resolve it, but these all add up to a man of letters fulfilling the emulation of his growing years. The earliest poetry of Wilfred Owen and the kind of poetry he might have written are all discernible in such a picture, but the great poetry he did write is not there. Sooner or later, in the life of every poet, there is a crisis, a revolution of heart, such as Keats described in The Fall of Hyperion, or Blake in this quatrain:

Each man is in his Spectre's Power  
 Until the arrival of that hour  
 When his Humanity awake  
 And cast his Spectre into the Lake.

Only two or three poets seem to have reached maturity before the age of twenty; Rimbaud is certainly one of these. Yet it is true that many have become aware of their vocation very young, long before they gained the power and equipment to throw off imitation and recognize the poems they must write, the poems belonging to their innate idiom and their particular lives. Owen was one of these. He was born at Oswestry in 1893, and we have his own word for it that his 'poethood', as he called it in an early poem, was born when he was ten or eleven. By the time he was twenty he had written an immense amount of verse, mainly of a derivative kind, but already revealing a deep sensitiveness to colour and music. Then he became ill, with the threat of tuberculosis, and went to France to recuperate.

A tutor at Bordeaux, he met the famous French poet Laurent Tailhade, from whom his ambition received its first living and professional encouragement. He had already written under the spell of the English poets he admired most, Shelley, Tennyson, and, above all, Keats. Of the poets of our own age, Yeats, more than any other, had taught him an extremely sensitive response to words, and already Siegfried Sassoon's work had excited and influenced him. But Tailhade's encouragement was immediate and perceptive: 'You paint with a delicate brush,' he wrote to Owen; 'Your piano has the modulations necessary to grace and emotion.'

Undoubtedly French poetry now began to influence him, particularly the Parnassian poets, and the Symbolists. He must have learnt from the music of Mallarme and Verlaine. There were also more contemporary influences than theirs. Francis Jammes was using assonantal rhymes, and so, in some of his lyrics, was Henri de Regnier; and there was considerable experiment in versification by France's younger poets. These things must have excited Owen, who was always experimenting in the potentialities of language and syllabic structure. He must have noticed the freshness of certain intimate lines by Jammes which he did not quite rhyme, in spite of the strict French tradition. Gradually he was to develop his own technique in a cleavage of rhyme and produce dissonance of a depth and resonance which no poet since has equalled. Here is the first printed example, from Edmund Blunden's collection, of his steps in that direction, where the rhyming lines are broken by single words in dissonantal pairs:

From my Diary - July, 1914

Leaves

Murmuring by myriads in the shimmering trees.

Lives



Wakening with wonder in the Pyrenees.  
 Birds  
 Cheerily chirping in the early day.  
 Bards  
 Singing of summer scything thro' the hay...

Its effect here is to distil the crystalline reflection of landscape. It is not England. It is the landscape of France, and its evocation is like that of Paul Fort:

Mais la terre est mon doux sujet de frénésie,  
 (But Earth is my most dear pretext of ecstasy).

I draw that line from Fort's poem, Harmonious Vision of the Earth, which Owen matches here in a kind of pantheistic exultation, a youthful sense of inexpressible joy. Both poets are drenched in the sunlight of the French hills.

How quickly this delicate impulse was to be shattered, the illusion of the tranquillity of July, 1914 broken. War was declared, and the sense of human tragedy was borne in upon Owen like an Apocalypse. His powerful imagination and his eager enthusiasm were brought to a standstill. Writing verse for beauty, making art for art's sake, became to him as ironical as furnishing with careful taste a house beneath which lay a mine that was already fusing. The gentle, low-voiced melancholy, almost like Verlaine, at which he had hinted in some of his early verses, was put away, for now he was confronted with 'the World's Powers who'd run amok'.

He wrote his sonnet The Seed, beginning:

War broke. And now the winter of the world  
 With perishing great darkness closes in.  
 The cyclone of the pressure on Berlin  
 Is over all the width of Europe whirled,  
 Rending the sails of progress...

and ending:

But now the exigent winter, and the need  
 Of sowings for new spring, and flesh for seed.

And he followed this with another sonnet, even more terrible in prophecy, which gives his first vision of the unreturning dead:

### The Unreturning

Suddenly night crushed out the day and hurled  
Her remnants over cloud-peaks, thunder-walled.  
Then fell a stillness such as harks appalled  
When far-gone dead return upon the world.

There watched I for the Dead; but no ghost woke.  
Each one whom Life exiled I named and called.  
But they were all to far, or dumb, or thrall'd,  
And never one fared back to me or spoke.

Then peered the indefinite unshapen dawn  
With vacant gleaming, sad as half-lit minds,  
The weak-limned hour when sick men's sighs are drained.  
And while I wondered on their being withdrawn  
Gagged by the smothering wing which none unbinds  
I dreaded even a heaven with doors so chained.

Up to this point Owen's poetry reveals two powers, his power to use words dramatically, and his power to dramatize himself, in resistance, as it were, to the words, so that the reader feels at once:

'The man behind this poem is Owen.'

A third force was soon to enter his poetry, giving it a new dimension.

It was in the middle of Winter, the extremely bitter Winter of 1916-1917, that Owen first came into real contact with the War. His enlistment had been controlled by his tutorial engagement and his delicate health had kept him back. In a letter written on January 7, 1917, he describes his first experiences as an Officer marching his men to the Line. At the end of the march, he says, 'As I was making my damp bed, I heard the guns for the first time. It was a sound not without a certain sublimity.' He was now on the Somme battlefield, and in the Front Line, and within a few days he was thrown into the worst fighting of the War. It was not even Front Line fighting, for

he was beyond the Front Line for many days holding an advanced post, described by him as 'seventh hell' and 'the worst post the Manchester's ever held.'

That Owen survived the next few months is miraculous. That he was able to continue to write poems is No Man's Land is even more so. Most miraculous of all is the quality of the poems he wrote. Here, in a letter, is his description of No Man's Land itself:

'It is like the eternal place of gnashing of teeth; the Slough of Despond could be contained in one of its crater-holes; the fires of Sodom and Gomorrah could not light a candle to it - to find the way to Babylon the Fallen. It is pock-marked like a body of foulest disease, and its odour is the breath of cancer... No Man's Land under snow is like the face of the moon, chaotic, crater-ridden, uninhabitable, awful, the abode of madness.'

The following poem shows the change in Owen's poetry after emerging from that experience:

#### Arms and the Boy

Let the boy try along this bayonet-blade  
How cold steel is, and keen with hunger of blood;  
Blue with all malice, like a madman's flash;  
And thinly drawn with famishing for flesh.

Lend him to stroke these blind, blunt bullet-heads  
Which long to nuzzle in the hearts of lads,  
Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth,  
Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple.  
There lurk no claws behind his fingers supple;  
And god will grow no talons at his heels,  
Nor antlers through the thickness of his curls.

This poem is sufficient to show Owen's development. Not only is it an example of most skilful dissonance, showing already his pre-eminence in this kind of metric, but it reveals that he has found a new approach to art, a casual, almost conversational approach. The intonation is no longer evocative, but it is now the intonation of ordinary speech. It is ordinary but it is memorable. Why? First, because Owen has something powerful to say; next, because he has found

a new medium of expression and mastered it; and last, because he does not force the words, but leaves them to create their own emphasis. Technically this poem is a combination of alliteration and dissonance, the alliteration being used to stay the motion of the poem. There are other devices. The last word of each line, the word on which the dissonance falls, is a slow and arresting word. And in the eighth line there is a device found in other poems of Owen: the line is shortened, to give poignancy:

Or give him cartridges of fine zinc teeth,  
Sharp with the sharpness of grief and death.

The poignancy of the eighth line throws into relief the line which follows it, the first line in the poem to be lengthened by a two-syllabled word at the end:

For his teeth seem for laughing round an apple,  
and, in the final couplet words are balanced: 'grow' balances 'through', and 'talons' balances 'antlers', as you will hear:

And god will grow no talons at his heels,  
Nor antler through the thickness of his curls.

These devices are significant, because it is necessary to remember that the deep emotional effect of Owen's poetry is always the reward of subtle craftsmanship as well as truth of feeling. Blake taught that the action of these two things was reciprocal, and his teaching is borne out in Owen's mature poems.

Owen, the master of dissonance, was not a slave to it; and by this time he could express himself perfectly in rhyme in such poems as 'Greater Love' and 'The Send-Off'. The conclusion of 'The Send-Off' again uses the shortened line to give a slowing, silent effect before the last line of all. It is true that in the manuscript of this poem an adjective was first used before 'village wells' and then

deleted, and no other substituted. I think Owen decided against an adjective, but whether an accident or not, the line is right as it stands. Again, in 'The Send-Off', colloquial speech-rhythms are used within a very strict verse-form.

#### The Send-Off

Down the close, darkening lane they sang their way  
To the siding-shed,  
And lined the train with faces grimly gay.

Their breasts were stuck all white with wreath and spray  
As men's are, dead.

Dull porters watched them, and a casual tramp  
Stood staring hard,  
Sorry to miss them from the upland camp.  
Then, unmoved, signals nodded, and a lamp  
Winked to the guard.

So secretly, like wrongs hushed-up, they went.  
They were not ours:  
We never heard to which front these were sent.

Nor there if they yet mock what women meant  
Who gave them flowers.

Shall they return to beatings of great bells  
In wild train-loads?  
A few, a few, too few for drums and yells,  
May creep back, silent, to village wells  
Up half-known roads.

How feeble seem the surges of declamatory poets compared with the emphasis of Owen's lowered voice. He seems to have discovered a new source of power. His patient irony, and his intensely real, but seemingly casual manner, achieve more depth and a wider extension than any of his immediate predecessors whose verse had been composed in settled climaxes. Poetry had threatened to become a melodramatic art; it was left to Owen to restore to it the dignity of drama. It is a question of directness, of spiritual candour. You can hardly take a line from Owen's greatest poems which would be out of place in ordinary conversation. In this Owen resembles Villon or Chaucer.

Like these early poets, and like Keats himself, he insists on 'the true voice of feeling', not 'the false beauty of art'.

What most poets achieve only slowly at the cost of great labour Owen was to accomplish in two years through the intensity of his experience: I mean the paring away of romantic decoration from his verse. The resultant starkness may be compared with Villon. Owen's poetry is not so naked as Villon's, with its barbaric and yet Christian strength; but what they have in common is compassion, and an awareness from beyond the grave. I shall take only one example from Le Grand Testament of Villon:

Better the rag-bowed pauper's lot  
 Alive, than once have been a lord  
 And under sumptuous tombs to rot, (lines 286-288)

and Owen, in 'A Terre':

Dead men may envy living mites in cheese,  
 Or good germs even.

Owen's lines have the cadence of natural speech, which is certainly one of the first characteristics of Villon's Testament, though it does not easily come through in translation.

Only occasionally in his war poems does Owen assume an heraldic utterance; and then the language becomes biblical. Such poems are 'The Show', an apocalyptic vision of the war in which he 'stands on a vague height with Death', and his final sonnet, 'The End':

After the blast of lightning from the East,  
 The flourish of loud clouds, the Chariot Throne;  
 After the drums of time have rolled and ceased,  
 And by the bronze west long retreat is blown,

Shall life renew these bodies? Of a truth  
 All death will He annul, all tears assuage?  
 Fill the void veins of Life again with youth,  
 And wash, with an immortal water, Age?

When I do ask white Age he saith not so:

"My head hangs weighed with snow."  
 And when I harken to the Earth, she saith:  
 "My fiery heart shrinks, aching. It is death.  
 Mine ancient scars shall not be glorified,  
 Nor my titanic tears, the seas, be dried."

The poems of heraldic utterance are, on the whole, prophetic poems; those of present experience are mainly written in the idiom of natural speech.

The end was not yet in sight, but Owen had already written his 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', an elegiac sonnet which blends the two styles:

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?  
 Only the monstrous anger of the guns.  
 Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle  
 Can patter out their hasty orisons.  
 No mockeries for them from prayers or bells,  
 Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,  
 The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;  
 And music calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?  
 Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes  
 Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.  
 The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;  
 Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,  
 And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Many anthologies have printed that poem. Some have printed the penultimate line:

Their flowers the tenderness of silent minds

and others:

Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds.

The truth is that Owen wrote 'silent', and 'patient' was a suggestion of Sassoon. Owen did not delete 'silent', but he pencilled 'patient' above it.

While he was writing these great poems, Owen was also experimenting constantly with dissonance and syllabic effects, much as Gerard

Manley Hopkins experimented, though I am not aware that Owen knew any of his poems. Only a few were published before Owen's death, but he may have seen some of these in Bridges' anthology, The Spirit of Man. The most experimental of Owen's poems are not connected with the war, but the war poems contain the fruits of his experiments.

Of the war poems, too, at least 'The Next War' and 'Conscious' show clearly the influence of Sassoon, to whom Owen dedicated the second version of 'A Terre'. In Blunden's edition 'Conscious' has one serious misprint. The line

Music and roses burnt through crimson slaughter  
should be:

Music and roses burst through crimson slaughter.

This has been corrected in C. Day Lewis's edition of 1963.

Here is the second half of the poem in which the line occurs:

But sudden evening muddles all the air -  
There seems no time to want a drink of water,  
Nurse looks so far away. And everywhere  
Music and roses burst through crimson slaughter.  
He can't remember where he saw blue sky.  
More blankets. Cold. He's cold. And yet so hot.  
And there's no light to see the voices by;  
There is no time to ask--he knows not what.

It was inevitable that the two poets should influence each other. Sassoon, whom Owen admired tremendously both as a poet and as a man, was his senior officer; when he was invalided home from France to Craiglockhart Hospital near Edinburgh, Sassoon was also a patient there. They had the same attitude to the war and showed their poems to each other. Sassoon encouraged him and praised his work, but for a long time he had an incomplete apprehension of Owen's genius. He has since paid tribute to it, in his *Memoirs*, in the highest terms.

Owen's poem 'The Chances', a colloquial poem in sonnet form, shows



a particular aspect of his genius, his way of constructing a poem so that he would gain emphasis where it was least expected. He puts into a soldier's mouth the recollection of how Jim had reckoned up his five chances of being wounded, badly or slightly, taken prisoner, killed, or else would escape. The poem ends:

But poor young Jim, 'e's livin' an' 'e's not;  
 'E reckoned 'e'd five chances, an' 'e's 'ad;  
 'E's wounded, killed, and pris'ner, all the lot,  
 The bloody lot all rolled in one. Jim's mad.

A similar poem, though less colloquial, is 'Dulce et Decorum Est'. In this poem the protest is akin to the protest in Sassoon's war poetry; it is directed against the indifference and false patriotism engendered at home. Owen was to begin his fragmentary Preface with the words: 'This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them.' The poem describes the victim of a gas attack:

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
 Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
 Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs  
 And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
 Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,  
 But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame, all blind;  
 Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
 Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys! An ecstasy of fumbling,  
 Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,  
 But someone still was yelling out and stumbling  
 And floundering like a man in fire or lime.  
 Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,  
 As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight  
 He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
 His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,

Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,  
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
 The old lie: Dulce et decorum est  
 Pro patria mori.

This poem I have emended in one line as Mr. Day Lewis has also done, in the light of textual criticism of the printed version drawn from the manuscripts. The line 'Bitter as the cud' is extended to make what Owen in his manuscript wrote. But the other short line of the poem, the eighth, 'Of gas-shells dropping softly behind,' is again an example of the extraordinary vividness brought about by slowing and shortening the line, which is made to create its own echoes. Mr. Day Lewis has here, however, chosen a longer manuscript variant.

'Above all,' Owen goes on to say in his fragmentary Preface which he intended to publish with his poems, 'this book is not concerned with poetry. My subject is War, and the pity of war. The poetry is in the pity.' And Sassoon, in his preface to the first edition of his dead friend's poems, says that some academically-minded people will be more interested in the experiments Owen made in assonance and dissonance than in the profound humanity of the poet's soul. It seems that both these poets were so disillusioned and embittered by the experience of war that they revolted against the background of art and poetry which gave them their first impulse to write. They revolted, in fact, against their own favourite arts, for poetry was to Owen what music was to Sassoon. In Owen's poem 'A Terre' the mortally wounded soldier says:

I have my medals? Discs to make eyes close.  
 My glorious ribbons? Ripped from my own back  
 In scarlet snreds. (That's for your poetry book.)

Here and elsewhere the sardonic note cannot be mistaken. Similarly Sassoon's revolt against music is found in his poem 'Dead Musicians', beginning:

From you, Beethoven, Bach, Mozart  
 The substance of my dreams took fire.  
 You built cathedrals in my heart,  
 And lit my pinnacled desire.

and ending:

'They're dead. For God's sake stop that gramophone.'

I do not think for a moment that either poet rejected these arts fundamentally, but I do think that both deliberately banished all their academic manifestations from the circle of experience, the fiery furnace, into which Necessity had thrown them as witnesses. Owen, particularly, realized the ineffectuality of academic verse to heal the world's wounds, the ineffectuality of words which represented only a part, a bewildered, cultured part, of mankind. Owen set himself to find the link between imagination and unimaginative life. The measure of his task is most profoundly stated in one of his greatest poems, 'Insensibility'. This poem draws a picture of the common soldier in whom the task of the imaginative life reposes. Here is the second half of the poem:

Happy the soldier home, with not a notion  
 How somewhere, every dawn, some men attack,  
 And many sighs are drained.  
 Happy the lad whose mind was never trained:  
 His days are worth forgetting more than not.  
 He sings along the march  
 Which we march taciturn, because of dusk,  
 The long, forlorn, relentless trend  
 From larger day to huger night.

We wise, who with a thought besmirch  
 Blood over all our soul,  
 How should we see our task  
 But through his blunt and lashless eyes?  
 Alive, he is not vital overmuch;  
 Dying, not mortal overmuch;

Nor sad, nor proud,  
 Nor curious at all.  
 He cannot tell  
 Old men's placidity from his.

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.  
 By choice they made themselves immune  
 To pity and whatever moans in man  
 Before the last sea and the hapless stars;  
 Whatever mourns when many leave these shores;  
 Whatever shares  
 The eternal reciprocity of tears.

It is the failure of the artistic intellect to solve the human problem that occupies Owen. Early in 1918 he inscribes to a friend a sonnet with an identity disc expressing his willingness to renounce fame, and his personal desire that his name should be blurred away. And much later, after being in action and suffering heavy losses, he writes in a letter to Sassoon:

'I shall feel again as soon as I dare, but now I must not. I don't take the cigarette out of my mouth when I write Deceased over their letters.

But one day I shall write Deceased over many books.'

There is always, underlying poetry, the irony that poetry can achieve nothing actual; it is this, more than anything else, that keeps a poet's work sincere. The suggestion that it can achieve revolutionary changes immediately, renders it picturesque. O'Shaughnessy's Music-Makers who are the 'movers and shakers of the world forever' and Shelley's 'unacknowledged legislators of the world' hold their position only through a time-lag of perhaps a century or more. Prose is the best instrument of propaganda, and the poetic intellect of Shelley or, for that matter, of Yeats, was at its worst when it incited to action. Poetry must, in a sense, die to action, must fall into the ground and die, before

it can bring forth fruit. Owen knew this, and all verse inciting to sedition, or to power, or to conflict, became, in Owen's eyes, a betrayal of the true nature of poetry, which must sink into the ground before it rises.

In 'Strange Meeting' he says, in one of the earlier, rejected versions of the poem:

What though we sink from men as pitchers falling,  
Many shall raise us up to be their filling.

and again in the same poem:

Then when much blood had clogged their chariot wheels  
I would go up and wash them from sweet wells  
Even with truths that lie too deep for taint.

He saw at once the failure of poetry as propaganda and the failure of an idealistic faith in poetry. Poetry became for him the well of candour from which all 'brute natures' had turned. But poetry that carried a standard on which heroic symbols were inscribed, torn by despair yet fluttering in triumph, this kind of poetry belonged to the books over which he would write Deceased.

Yet there is reconciliation between the poet and the common soldier. In Owen's poem 'A Terre,' the earth itself resolves the differences between them, between conscious and unconscious heroism. Here is the last part of the poem:

"I shall be one with nature, herb, and stone",  
Shelley would tell me. Shelley would be stunned:  
The dullest Tommy hugs that fancy now.  
"Pushing up daisies" is their creed, you know.  
To grain, then, goes my fat, to buds my sap,  
For all the usefulness there is in soap.  
D'you think the Boche will ever stew man-soup?  
Some day, no doubt, if...

Friend, be very sure  
I shall be better off with plants that share  
More peacably the meadow and the shower,  
Soft rains will touch me, as they could touch once,  
And nothing but the sun shall make me ware.  
Your guns may crash around me. I'll not hear,

Or, if I wince, I shall not know I wince.  
 Don't take my soul's poor comfort for your jest.  
 Soldiers may grow a soul when turned to fronds,  
 But here the thing's best left at home with friends.  
 My soul's a little grief, grappling your chest,  
 To climb your throat on sobs, easily chased  
 On other sighs and wiped by fresher winds.

Carry my crying spirit till it's weaned  
 To do without what blood remained these wounds.

By this time Owen's acknowledged purpose was, by showing the horrors of war in minute detail, to awaken in people a sense of pity so strong and of horror so realistic that it would stop war. He was planning to publish photographs of war's atrocities (about the atrocities of peace which were to come twenty years later, he knew nothing), and he drew up a table of contents for his book of poems in which they were separated into groups or singly, to represent different aspects of the evil of war. This table of contents is found at the end of Blunden's book.

Two of those poems are 'Mental Cases,' originally called 'The Deranged', a poem of insistent rhythm using feminine endings throughout and rhyme only a little, and 'Disabled', in which a disfigured body is used to evoke happy reminiscence. This is Owen's parallel of Sassoon's shorter lyric which begins 'Does it matter? --Losing your legs?' In Owen's poem the reminiscence is not clearly pronounced, as in Wordsworth, but intricately suggested. A legless, armless man is being wheeled in a chair, which has come to rest when the poem opens:

He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark,  
 And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey.  
 Legless, sewn short at elbow. Through the park  
 Voices of boys rang saddening like a hymn,  
 Voices of play and pleasure after day,  
 Till gathering sleep had mothered them from him.

The next three verses describe all the romantic impulses which

prompted him to turn soldier and to lie about his age in order to be accepted. The poem ends:

To-night he noticed how the woman's eyes  
 Passed from him to the strong men that were whole.  
 How cold and late it is! Why don't they come  
 And put him into bed? Why don't they come?

It was in the summer of 1917, when Owen had been invalided to Craiglockhart Hospital, that he saw so much of Sassoon. From December, after leaving hospital, he was stationed for some time at Scarborough. In these two places he continued to write poems and to experiment in dissonance. An example is 'Miners', composed in January, 1918. This poem is set in his Table of Contents against the theme of 'The Future Forgetting the Dead in War.' This is one of only four poems printed during Owen's lifetime, and he announced it in a letter to his mother: 'Wrote a poem on the Colliery Disaster; but I got mixed with the War in the end. It is short, but ho! sour!'

The poem ends:

The centuries will burn rich loads  
 With which we groaned,  
 Whose warmth shall lull their dreaming lids  
 While songs are crooned.  
 But they will not think of us poor lads  
 Lost in the ground.

This theme of 'the Future forgetting the dead in war', which was to be most powerfully presented at the end of one of his last poems, 'Spring Offensive', is recurrent in Owen's poetry. His war was the key to all wars, and to the disaster which his prophetic mind envisaged. Leaves would grow again to cover the broken relics of battle; horror would be glossed over by a gaudy and forgetful Spring. Then would come the End, the immense catastrophe, wrought by pride and cruelty, to which the Great War pointed.

This theme was also Sassoon's; whereas, however, Sassoon's chief weapon was satire, it is one Owen seldom uses. It may be noticed that they resemble each other most where they both deal with a satirical theme. When the satirical element is missing, they are utterly different. Here is Sassoon's 'The Dug-Out':

Why do you lie with your legs ungainly huddled,  
 And one arm bent across your sullen cold  
 Exhausted face? It hurts my heart to watch you,  
 Deep-shadow'd from the candle's guttering gold:  
 And you wonder why I shake you by the shoulder;  
 Drowsy you mumble and sigh and shift your head...  
You are too young to fall asleep for ever;  
And when you sleep you remind me of the dead.

Here is Owen's 'Asleep':

Under his helmet, up against his pack,  
 After the many days of work and waking,  
 Sleep took him by the brow and laid him back.  
 And in the happy no-time of his sleeping,  
 Death took him by the heart. There was a quaking  
 Of the aborted life within him leaping...  
 Then chest and sleepy arms once more fell slack.  
 And soon the slow, stray blood came creeping  
 From the intrusive lead, like ants on track.  
 Whether his deeper sleep lie shadowed by the shaking  
 Of great wings, and the thoughts that hung the stars,  
 High-pillowed on calm pillows of God's making  
 Above these clouds, these rains, these sleets of lead,  
 And these winds' scimitars;  
 --Or wether yet his thin and sodden head  
 Confuses more and more with the low mould,  
 His hair being one with the grey grass  
 And finished fields of autumns that are old...  
 Who knows? Who hopes? Who troubles? Let it pass!  
 He sleeps. He sleeps less tremulous, less cold  
 Than we who must wake, and waking, say Alas!

Above and beyond the poem Sassoon is the Great Mourner;  
 Owen, the seer. Their common ground is satire, compassion, indig-  
 nation. But Sassoon is indignant with the broken loveliness of  
 Earth, the landscape he was born to, now invaded by horror and  
 deformity. Owen is indignant with the landscape which has cheated  
 us. He is concerned with chaos; Sassoon is only revolted by it.



Owen seeks in chaos the clue to life, and to death also. His compassion is metaphysical.

If we examine the metric it is at once clear that the two poets have a different approach to lyricism. Owen's poem uses touch throughout; all the similies of the poem are tactile. Sassoon's poem is not tactile but aural; it uses lilt and cadence for its effects. Even the line 'And you wonder why I shake you by the shoulder' is musically at a remove from the actual shaking; the composition is musical, and in a subtle way abstracted from the experience. Sassoon rarely speaks in Owen's passive, plastic way.

In both these poems one might identify the background as the blackness of despair; yet how different is the imaginative darkness which surrounds Owen from that which surrounds Sassoon. Sassoon has only one light in his darkness, one consolation, his love for the living, which is surely enough. But Owen has stepped out from this familiar love to explore the territory of eternal darkness. It is in this way that he finds the stars; and Owen has great mastery in establishing a lightning union of the spacious and the immediate, the immeasurable spaces and the touched thing. This faculty is exercised again in the poems:

#### Futility

Move him into the sun--  
Gently its touch awoke him once,  
At home, whispering of fields unsown,  
Always it woke him, even in France,  
Until this morning and this snow.  
If anything might rouse him now  
The kind old sun will know.

Think how it wakes the seeds,

Woke once the clays of a cold star.  
 Are limbs, so dear-achieved, are sides,  
 Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?  
 Was it for this the clay grew tall?  
 --O what made fatuous sunbeams toil  
 To break earth's sleep at all?

Owen had undergone a change of consciousness of the magnitude of that experienced by Keats before he wrote his last great Odes. It was not only a purification like the purge of tragedy, but an intellectual development. But whereas Keats in his letters illumines the whole course of his development, Owen, with characteristic reticence, only hints at his. Suddenly elegance, Parnassian poetry, the mere creation of beauty, became for Owen valueless things. He was now occupied with the supreme problem: the betrayal of Life by Art. It is easy to see how his final poetry is shaped by distrust. 'One day I shall write Deceased over many books.' Yes, and over his own lines too. In exactly the same way Keats rejected Hyperion.

The distrust grows in Owen. Here is an extract from 'Insensibility':

The front line withers,  
 But they are troops who fade, not flowers  
 For poets' tearful fooling:  
 Men, gaps for filling,  
 Losses who might have fought  
 Longer; but no one bothers.

It seems at first paradoxical that as soon as he loses faith in technique for its own sake, his own technique should become so infinitely more accomplished. He writes with distrust, with reluctance, and therefore with more power and technical mastery than ever before. Perhaps even Keats did not see far enough or penetrate deeply enough into the latent virtues of form,

complexities of metre and cadence which are justified in the attainment of true simplicity. Or perhaps it is always true that the resolution of genius so ordains a sensitive mind that the greatest artist is he who is nearest to not caring whether he writes or not.

If Owen were living to-day, he would see that several of his fellow-soldiers who survived the war had written of their 'comrades who went under', among them Robert Graves and Edmund Blunden, and especially David Jones, whose writing in some of the descriptions contained in In Parenthesis bears a marked resemblance to Owen. What Owen himself might have written is difficult to conjecture. On the one hand he is a realist with one eye on the sacred, a direct descendant of Chaucer and Villon, and on the other a creative experimenter in verse, an innovator. He is a tragic poet, yet his irony indicates strong reserves of humour.

He was one of those restless spirits to whom art brought calm, and whose art brought calm to the world. What does the length of a poet's fame matter, beside this poetry? And the length of a poet's work, what is that, beside it? The letter of Owen's poetry will live as long as the poetry of our age is remembered, but it will live outside the scales of ambition and comparison. Owen, though dying at twenty-five, had outlived the hierarchies. What a relief it is to read someone for his depth only, and for his sincerity.

"For the Reading of Poems at Greg-y-nog"

Originally written in a train between Hereford and Swansea, this introduction was meant for a reading Watkins gave to an historical society in North Wales. For a major lecture Watkins used a laboriously prepared script, such as "Problems of Communication," but for a small group he merely jotted notes, which often revealed whatever he happened to have on his mind at the moment. (Thus, much to its surprise, a poetry-and-jazz session at University College Swansea heard Watkins deliver an impromptu introduction on the villany of cutting down elderly trees.)

This reading was aimed at people who like poetry but have little knowledge of it; hence its laborious explanation of what Watkins would usually take for granted, such as the difference between lyric and non-lyric poetry.

## For the Reading of Poems at Greg-y-nog

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The advantage of hearing a poet read his own work is that, if he can reproduce what he heard in the final phase of composition, he is giving you the aural manuscript of the poem. He alone can do this.

This is only true of lyric poets, of poets who write for the ear, who receive their poems lyrically, and do not design them unlyrically, for clarity and effect. There are some poets who work in this other way and who have no feeling about how the work is read, as it is not governed by the ear, but is, rather, material for the professional actor to use to the best possible advantage.

I am a lyric poet. I also believe that the sound-pattern of lyric poetry is more clearly related to music than to prose. Do not misunderstand me. Some of the purest lines in poetry are colloquial speech, that is to say, they would not be at all out of place in prose; but the dominant pattern of any form that is lyrical is totally different, and this is, even mathematically, closer to music than to prose.

Poetry that is divorced from speech, and by speech I mean the speech-idiom of to-day, runs a great risk of being artificial, and therefore losing its power to move. Even so, if his theme demands it, a poet must take this risk. Poetry is, after all, artificial in structure; it is artifice, and the poet who believes only in the order of natural speech will neglect that other, compelling order, the order of imaginative emphasis.

A sonnet, for instance, comprises a system of lines. The odds against these rhymes occurring in natural speech within the length of fourteen lines would be many millions to one. Yet Shakespeare, within this structure, produces such a natural, free and beautiful line as: I have no precious time at all to spend. The supreme art here is to harness the natural and colloquially forceful to the artificial pattern.

Milton is more rhetorical, but that is because his theme usually demands rhetoric. Even he, perhaps the most inverted and Latinized of the great English poets, can produce, at any moment, the unforgettable direct line of living speech, but he is afraid of nothing, being such a complete master of form. The opening three lines of Paradise Lost, which every other poet would have botched, are the only right lines for that, and Milton found them.

Everything valid in poetry is true, and each poem, from an epic to an epigram or a piece of nursery rhyme or fantasy, makes different demands. I am bound to feel more strongly the poetry of exaltation, because that is a necessity of my mind. The conscious effort of verse that is not exalted, but rather laconic or debunking, is too often in the interests of reputation. But one must be magnanimous. One must throw out crumbs to the birds even if they foul the lawn. What is well done is, I suppose, worth doing.

'There is a place at the bottom of the graves where contraries are equally true.' That saying of William Blake expresses, perhaps, better than any other, the distinction between poetry and philosophy. Contrary statements in poetry can both be true.

In a poem by Yeats, for example, cadence itself brings a compensating force:

Never to have lived is best, ancient writers say,  
Never to have drawn the breath of life...

Poetry is really closer to theology. The Book of Job is full of theology, and it is full of contradictions, the clash of imagination with greater imagination, the journey of integrity through the dark night of the soul, the equating of arrogance and humility, the reconciliation of opposites through the unknown dimensions of forgiveness and love. This is poetry.

"A Note on 'Earth-Dress'" (May 1967)

This note is as much an analysis of the moment of artistic creation, or of the mystical experience, as it is of the individual poem. In fact, it is almost a philosophy of life in miniature.

The occasion for the writing of this note was unusual. I had written a paper on birds in Watkins' poetry, a likely enough topic as his birds are usually poets in not-very-subtle disguise. I quoted this passage from "Earth-Dress":

I would awaken eyes  
Time has made unaware  
Of wonders of world-size;  
But when hawk-hovering air  
On the unsheltered road  
Scours for divinity  
The beggar and the god,  
Men clutch mortality,  
Cling the ruinous,  
Perishing fabric of things,  
To build the grave's dark house,  
Terrified by those wings,<sup>1</sup>

and remarked that "hawk-hovering air" and "those wings" did not appear to have the usual connection with inspiration and the poet's craft. The following week, Watkins handed me this note, saying, "This is how I understand the poem."

<sup>1</sup>From Ballad of the Mari Lwyd, 45-48.



## A Note on "Earth-Dress"

Man, insofar as he is soul, is indestructible; but he cannot, while he is in the flesh, endure the lightning of poetic genius itself. He cannot confront eternity; to him, while he is living in time, it is terror; so he seeks the shelter of man-made things and man-made thoughts, habitual words, a condition where the lightning is tempered and only reflections of eternity are seen. Prometheus is made stronger by his heroic power to resist the elements and their scorn. He has also the power to recognize divinity in its time-filtered form; but even he cannot confront the god. "Hawk-hovering air," winter, death, are all properties against which he can show heroism, but about which his understanding is blind. It is right that men should "clutch mortality" and "thatch with fears and calms their shadowy home"; lightning is all-consuming, but the "close-knit joy of day" is made of such things. The Promethean element in man's nature will endure anyway, so long as he does not lose the reflections of that eternity to which his soul belongs; but here he must trade in time; and the comfort and charity necessary to him are also found to be divine attributes. The will of Prometheus, which is also man's will, is right in defying the elements, but insofar as it defies the lightning itself, it represents a warning to man. The lightning, poetic genius in one of its manifestations, godhead itself in another, is inaccessible to mankind except through a Mediator.

Comment on the Vietnam War  
 Cecil Woolf and John Bagguley, eds., Authors Takes Sides on Vietnam (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 74

Over three hundred authors from the United States, Britain, France, and the Soviet Union were asked the following questions:

- (a) Are you for, or against, the intervention of the United States in Vietnam?
- (b) How, in your opinion, should the conflict in Vietnam be resolved?

Watkins had no interest in or knowledge of politics. He was as well acquainted with the newspaper version of current events as most contemporaries, but he did not expect to find truth there. His answers to the above questions would probably be called abstract moralizing by many, but they are consistent with his beliefs, both Christian and artistic, and with his own experience of war. His war poems (found in The Lamp and the Veil and The Lady with the Unicorn) are about human suffering,

Whether on the shore of Greece or of Wales,  
 Whether in London or in Nagasaki,<sup>1</sup>

with hardly any relevance to the socio-economic factors of the war.

Watkins did not believe for a minute that what he suggests here could ever take place.

<sup>1</sup>From "Niobe," The Death Bell, 32.

### Comment on the Vietnam War

I write as one totally unskilled in politics, yet deeply concerned with human behavior. A country cannot be known until one enters it; and, even then, under the camouflage of war, it is unrecognizable. One cannot understand war without either participating in it or experiencing its effects, and the participants themselves are driven to act blindly. War is a deforming agent, releasing vindictive forces and with them every kind of cruelty. I cannot therefore accept as good a policy which directs war and employs these forces.

If American aggression in Vietnam is not good, is it justified by expediency? Is one form of evil necessary to combat and subdue another? Aggression always springs from fear, and in war it is accompanied by the nobler instinct to protect one's own kind, to resist any tyranny which threatens them. Even this nobler instinct, which nearly always brings with it incalculable heroism, cannot excuse war.

I am asked what I advocate as a solution. The first necessity is to end the fighting, the second to arrive at a just peace. The withdrawal of American troops, far from humiliating their country, would be an act of international heroism. There is no justification for war today, or at any time in the future. Where evil exists it must be treated by peaceful means, and unjust imprisonment or persecution should be subject to international supervision. The wounds of violence cannot be healed by violence. An enlightened nation is one that hates war.

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