



Kerygma

Kerygma

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Celebration Peregrine: "Little Gidding"

Celebration, because it predicates itself on belief, is a mode of expression difficult for the intellect to achieve. The lament-and-decry, on the other hand, is more freely and easily arrived at. One follows upon an energetic attempt at ordering experience; the other is occasioned by sight. Poetry of the first kind is more difficult to make but usually more splendid in its beauty. It is the work of the fully mature poet; its experience should be the mode of being of the fully mature man. As men we approach the experience more or less; in poetry it is sometimes given in its completeness. Probably all poetry, even that of the second and lesser kind, arises out of the attempt of the man to live the knowledge held out in the first.

The *Quartets* are the product of Eliot's maturity; he hoped they would be the fruit and evidence, the correlative, of his faith. "Little Gidding" is the last of the four quartets and the resolution of the first three. The other quartets are enfolded within it so successfully that a separate consideration is, I think, no great violence.

I have assumed what I will not attempt to prove: that a poem of celebration is more difficult to make than a poem that decries. I am not sure that this has always been true, but I feel certain that it was true in Eliot's time and that it may still be. The poem of celebration in Eliot's time had to overcome a considerable inertia due in part to the poet's own sensibility and in part to the distance between the poet and his audience. Eliot himself, in his essays, has more than anyone else made us aware of these difficulties. What I am referring to, of course, is simply that state of affairs, unique it seems in history, the description of which has been the central preoccupation of criticism since Arnold. Its symptoms have been denoted variously as the "dissociation of sensibility," the "secular world-view," the "loss of tradition," the "loss of the folk," the "tyranny of denotation," the "literal imagination," the

"historical mind," the "guarded style." These things have contributed to make of all poetry a vulnerable occupation at best, but their effect on the poetry of celebration has been almost to kill it.

The straightforward love lyric, for instance, has for some time been confined to the brittle products of tin pan alley and the movie scenarios. Religious poetry, unless it is used as an exercise in existential torment, has been relegated to the Sunday supplement or to the less social-conscious Catholic journals. The poet, either that he cannot or will not, simply does not risk the lyric of celebration anymore. It sometimes appears we have even come to believe that irony is the only attitude properly poetic. What currency this belief now has is owing in large part to the influence of Eliot's earlier poetry no doubt, but if he has contributed to it he has also been one of the few to transcend it.

He transcends it, I think, in "Little Gidding." If his success is not complete it is nonetheless substantial, and, in a way, heroic. The attempt itself is heroic since the poem is made even more vulnerable and naked by being for the most part a poetry of statement.

We tend to be more amenable to the poetry of celebration when its stuff is the image and metaphor; the more freedom we have to insert our own experience into the words of the poet the more likely we are to accept the genuineness of his belief. We, all of us I suppose, have something around which we can compose a gesture of belief, and if the poet is capable of approximating this gesture we will approximately accept his convictions. This is partly the reason, I think, for the popularity of Yeats — he gives plenty of room to wander in his experience without being too pushy about his beliefs. His connotations are extensive while his denotations are not embarrassingly precise.

With Eliot's *Quartets*, however, the consequences are not so happily ecumenical. R. P. Blackmur puts it well when he says: "Eliot as poet is compelled to present the aesthetic, the actual experience of and under Christianity at the same time that he uses his faith to understand or express that experience." And so it is with "Little Gidding." The experience of the poem can only be held and understood if one understands the faith that supports and gives rise to it. If the faith is rejected offhand as impossible then it becomes impossible to understand the poem. I would not intimidate the skeptical by suggesting that if the poem is good then the faith must be true, and certainly the converse is not true either though some believers would have it so. I suppose all I am saying is

that there are statements of belief in the poem, and that moreover they are necessary to the ordering of experience within the work.

In view of their shared convictions and the similarity of their critical writing it is not very surprising that the poetry of Eliot should show a certain kinship with that of his sometime disciple, Allen Tate. "Little Gidding" is in several respects like Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead." They share a common purpose, I think, in their attempt to deal with the relevance of tradition and the meaning of history. And in order to ground these speculations in the concrete they employ the same strategy: both poets put their meditative speaker in a place where history can be evoked with more than usual intensity, where traditional associations have accrued in more than usual depth. For Tate the place is a Confederate cemetery, for Eliot it is the seventeenth-century chapel built by Nicholas Ferrar for the benefit of the religious community he founded. The place chosen is important, for each poet finds here a center of meaning. In the cemetery Tate finds present the values of his folk which sustain his poetry — their chivalry, their courage, their love of a land. Ferrar's chapel sustains for Eliot the values and truths he has come to adopt in the absence of a folk: the royalism of Charles I who visited there after his defeat: "If you came at night like a broken king"; the "classicism," the *associated* sensibility if you like, of the metaphysical poets — Herbert and Crashaw were connected with Ferrar's community; the Anglicized Christianity that Eliot adopted in his maturity. It is this last meaning which Eliot finds in the chapel that is most important for the poem. The church has been consecrated in time by the faith of those who have worshipped there; and to visit it one must approach with a kind of reverence, a certain form:

You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid.

The time of the visit is rendered as a state of soul or a stage in meditation. The poem begins with a description of the English winter that seems at first like so many other tonal pictures in Eliot's "bleak" poems. When the note of celebration comes we are hardly prepared for it, but it becomes clear that the time of visiting the chapel is a special time of promise and joy when the air is said to:

glow more intense than blaze of branch, or brazier,
Stirs the dumb spirit: no wind but pentecostal fire.

. . . . Between melting and freezing
The soul's sap quivers.

This is the time of insight, "the springtime/But not in time's covenant"; it is one of those "timeless moments" of spiritual penetration which, for Eliot, are woven into the pattern that is history.

In "The Dry Salvages" the poet speaks of a "significant soil" that is the ground of every meaningful experience. In "Burnt Norton" he recounts a mystical experience of timelessness in which both past and future are annihilated. In "Little Gidding" the two come together to create "the intersection of the timeless moment . . . England and nowhere. Never and always." This pentecostal experience is effected through the agency of tradition as the poet indicates in the concluding lines of the first section:

And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.

Another kind of time is introduced in the song that begins section II. It is the profane time that exists outside of faith and it provides a kind of psychological history in sharp contrast to the Christian history that Eliot celebrates. It is the time of Jaques' "Seven Ages of Man," of Shelley's "Ozymandias," and, it must be considered, the time of Eliot's audience. It is a context of transience and decay. The composition of the song depends on an ironic turnaround of Heraclitus' theory of the simultaneous birth and decay of the four primal elements. For Eliot there is no hint of rebirth; each stanza ends with the death of an element and with the elements go man's toil and his profane love. Fire is presented in the song as a purely destructive force in contrast to the illuminating pentecostal fire of the first section and it will have still another meaning in the later sections of the quartet.

The air raid scene which takes up the rest of the second section is a good example of the "spatial form" that Joseph Frank believes is characteristic of most of Eliot's poetry. The dramatic action follows so close upon the speculative that the two are perceived almost simultaneously.

The attack has just ended in the "uncertain hour before morning." The hint of pentecost recurs in the image of the German bomber as "the dark dove with the flickering tongue." This is a device Eliot uses extensively throughout the poem. He will use the same symbol, now

with a positive connotation, now with a negative one. The lyric of section IV depends for its movement on this tactic.

I think it is common knowledge that the speaker's encounter with his "dead master" in this section is patterned on Canto XV of the *Inferno* in which Dante meets his former teacher, Brunetto Latini. The texts are similar in more than style. In both instances the master foretells that the poet will be rejected by his people — Brunetto predicts:

" . . . that ungrateful, malignant people, who of old
came down from Fiesole, and still savours of the
mountain and the rock, will make itself an enemy to
thee for thy good deeds. "

and the "compound ghost" of "Little Gidding":

Last season's fruit is eaten
And the fulfilled beast shall kick the empty pail.

The speaker's master continues to adduce consequences within the context of psychological history that are even less felicitous. He foresees: "the cold friction of expiring sense," "the conscious impotence of rage at human folly," and worst of all, "the shame of motives late revealed, and the awareness of things ill done and done to others' harm/Which once you took for exercise of virtue."

The "compound ghost" differs from Brunetto in offering his pupil some chance of success over the exigencies of psychological time. He warns the poet:

From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit
Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire
Where you must move in measure like a dancer.

The sound and the mood of this passage suggest a notion like Yeats' "An aged man is but a paltry thing . . . / unless soul clap its hands and sing" but the refining process Eliot is celebrating develops a distinctively Christian meaning in the following sections of the poem.

From this point the remaining three movements of "Little Gidding" become exercises in meditation on the paradoxes of Christian faith and history.

The third movement begins with a block of speculation that has all the appearance and sound of philosophical prose. It is, I think, statement at its very weakest, and it serves *only* as superfluous commentary on what could be understood without it. The sense of the passage I

take to be that "indifference" is the worst mode of being, and "attachment to self and to things and to persons" is less than a kind of detachment that grows out of desire but culminates in a selfless, disinterested love that leads to freedom. The rest of the movement is almost as dogged but more incremental to the poem's meaning.

Unless I have misunderstood her precedents the entrance of Juliana of Norwich is embarrassingly abrupt. Her contribution is:

Sin is Behovely, but
All shall be well, and
All manner of thing shall be well.

However, after this initial violence, if it is a violence (I suppose one who employs spatial form enjoys a certain freedom), Eliot makes good the quote in the remainder of the poem. In fact we might say his strategy from here on is to make a context for these lines.

The scene of the meditation moves back now to the chapel at Little Gidding and the poet, probably thinking of his experience in the air raid, is forced to ask the question: "Why should we celebrate / These dead more than the dying?" It is a challenging question and a popular one in our day. It is usually articulated a bit more bluntly by the man who questions the relevance of tradition to our current "existential" crises. He will generally bring out the accusation that "you are trying to turn back the clock," or, "you are still fighting the Civil War." Eliot's answer is the same as Tate's:

It is not to ring the bell backward
Nor is it an incantation
To summon the specter of a Rose
We cannot revive old factions
We cannot restore old policies
Or follow an antique drum.

This is statement on its best behavior and suited well to celebration. Eliot says finally that he celebrates not the causes of the dead men but the meaning and beauty of their dying for some cause:

What they leave us — a symbol:
A symbol perfected in death.

The section ends with a return to the quote from Dame Juliana expanded to include this time the conditional:

By the purification of the motive
In the ground of our beseeching.

The high ground of this poem is the short lyric that makes the fourth movement. It is a step up in pitch and intensity from the celebration of faith in the preceding movement and its compression gives it a strength and richness that makes it stand forth from the rest of the work. It combines complexity of thought with a fine economy of words that marks the best of Herbert and is one of the strong points of Donne. Its meaning, I think, is another instance of kinship with Allen Tate. It seems to me to be very near that short but probably most difficult of Tate's religious poems, "The Cross." Both celebrate the paradox of Christian faith; both do it better than anything we have had since the poetry of Hopkins. This brief lyric will probably bear as much close analysis as the whole work of which it is a part, and it is not unlikely that such an explication would yield most of the content of "Little Gidding." I will be content only to point out Eliot's use of two-faced words to embody his theme of paradox. The coupling of two radically different meanings to the same word in "pyre on pyre," "fire by fire," "fire on fire" makes the action of the poem. Christ is

the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove

We can only choose to be "consumed" by desire or "redeemed from fire by fire"—that is, redeemed by the fire of a sacred love. This is the message of the "dove" which "breaks the air / With flame of incandescent terror." The German dive-bomber is here in a startling paradox made into the paraclete. The symbol of *fire* attains its final meaning in this section when it becomes identified with Christ's love for man and the reciprocal love of the Christian for God.

I think it is unfortunate for his poem that Eliot in his concluding movement reverts back to the discursive presentation of the third section. Structurally this last part is justified as a coda for the *Quartets* as a whole. In it the poet attempts to recapitulate the principal symbols of the earlier quartets and to give them a new meaning in terms of the knowledge he has acquired through the meditation at Little Gidding. Unhappily the resolution is effected not, as in the fourth movement by a progress through tension, but by a simple addition of symbols.

The opening lines recall the final thoughts of "East Coker" in which Eliot had assumed for his own purposes the motto of Mary Queen of Scots: "In my end is my beginning." Now the poet enlarges upon this

theme to include his insight into the historical process: "What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning." The lines which follow deal with the poetic process as a moment of insight. They are an answer to the skepticism of "Burnt Norton" in regard to the efficacy of language. The attempt of poetry is seen as one of the "still-points of history":

Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning.
Every poem an epitaph. And any action
Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat
Or to an illegible stone: and that is where we start.

History, tradition, insight, and faith are drawn into the meditation which once again is given specific ground in Ferrar's chapel in the concluding paragraph:

A people without history
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails
On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel
History is now and England.
With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling.

The last line is an importation from a fourteenth-century mystical treatise and serves to emphasize the Christian nature of the experience.

The final verses of "Little Gidding" seem a somewhat hurried effort to tie up all the symbols of the *Quartets* in an attempt at a musical finale. The concluding twenty-one lines tend toward the compression of a list rather than the rich compactness of the lyric in movement IV.

The experiences of history and insight, encountered at Little Gidding and juxtaposed to the incomplete visions of "Burnt Norton," "East Coker," and "Dry Salvages," are made to point to a condition of fulfillment through wholeness and sacred love:

A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

In another poem we are offered a similar fusion in the marriage of a rose with light. It is of course the array of the blessed illumined and transfigured in the light of Divine Love. I do not believe I hazard much

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in judging the *Divine Comedy* to be the greatest poem of celebration in the literary tradition. The way in which Dante achieves his miracle of language is the index of his genius, the failure of Eliot to approach him is an indication, I think, of the limits of another order of imagination. The failure has something to do with the aridity of symbols compared with the splendor of a movement through paradox and analogy. It has something to do with the subordination of drama to thoughts. It has something to do with the celebration of meaning rather than being.

But to be less than Dante is hardly to be little. Eliot's poem is a great one even if it be crippled. It would be great if only because of the size of its undertaking. I have mentioned several times Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead" as a somewhat similar effort by a poet like Eliot in his sensibility, who shares with him a like object for celebration. But Tate's poem, though it is finer one, cannot compare with Eliot's in its scale or the magnitude of its vision — and the magnitude of Tate is considerable.

The Flame and the Log

You stood in the brook gently like a candle on a silver plate, I remember, pink and slender on both feet, slimmer than most women, closer to the bank than I thought you were from where I stood. I must have watched you for an hour, thinking the first different thoughts, feeling something for the first moment in a long long day that is echoed now. It is night again today a year later, hardly a change, me with the same thoughts. Now in a room in the city, book walled chamber, then by the stream, rock walled rippling water flashing sun, then as now in this dark room. My books shadowing up the wall, there by the fireplace; and the fire's gone out like it did then when she died and I sat here alone with the fire in ashes. Books, brook and all. But the brook hadn't happened yet. And I was sad. Sick unto death she was and she died. How old was I to cry so bitterly then when all I do now is think, think back to then. How much it was like this after her death, no difference in the books, the fire; so much difference in me. Death was a long time eating up the fire on the hearth; it was over after the bones showed through the skin.

I walked over to the ashes, one foot ahead, the other, that's it carefully across the different shades of braided rug; floor is too rich, brown-grained stained almost red in firelight to cover it wall to wall with a rug, she said and made this one herself from old wool double breasted suits hung in the closet. Blue track, russet, tweed lines woven, strung together like loops of plaited hair by invisible threads and invisible motions of a wide eyed needle still moving by her hand, she not knowing I watched her so often . . .

Like you didn't know I watched you standing in the water bending over a rock, ankles hidden, then knees by the rapid flowing lowering stream. You and the rock and the water bending around your legs, the only round things I could see, unless I looked up past green-black series

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of points, straight-broken needles spiring up to the top of pine trees, where round clouds perched rumbling, white-grey mountain cumulus storm clouds, grumbling. You heard it too and looked up into the dust-shimmer of a sun shaft piercing the spires, staining their wood red, painting you gold with light.

Skin gold glowing against dark water that must be cold in July, cold as my wife's blood ran cold at the end.

"No, it's not cold, come and see. The water is shallow so the sun can warm it between the trees." Your voice to me rushed through the leaves of an aspen, shook them, led me to you across thin grass woven with pine cones and toadstools. A tree as thick as my body was fallen between us, crumbling golden natural sawdust into the dirt when I stepped on it over it toward you. Some of the tree's lichen clung to my pant-leg and I stooped over to loosen it, thinking of maggots, pale green almost grey on the edges, a tiny patch of flowers shaped in intricate folds one over another growing by the death of the tree, clinging to the bark by millions of kinky-worm roots hanging from the brown side of the plant. I tossed it away.

Why isn't it cold? I shouted at you, trying to outsound the stream.

"Sorry, can't hear you, the stream has me . . ." you leaned forward beginning to walk heavily, wading through the current stepping carefully out of the sun shaft piercing around you, slipping smoothly against wet rocks, shading your eyes in another sun shaft to see my direction. You came to a wide space of sand stretched with glass and ran shattering it into slivers sparkling against me.

It is cold!

"No it's wet and the two aren't the same."

You lifted your hand to me, me standing on the bank wondering how I had reached it, looking over my shoulder to see how far I had walked without putting my feet on the ground—from the log through your movement to you.

"Are you waiting for someone? No one will find you here unless you've told them just how to come." You were beside me and I hadn't pulled your hand, body following to me. Shifting dirt closed over a footprint where you had climbed up lithely beside me—dirt closing over, over what? For the first time I couldn't remember the sadness. "Who is it, maybe I know them. Not many people . . ."

No one, no one; maybe you, who are you? Your hair hung in one long braid over your shoulder almost to the waist, the same brown-red color as the trees hit by sunlight; and your eyes too the same color. Are you a fewn? The question I asked was as silly as not helping you up the bank, and I felt my face warmed, felt myself smaller instead of taller than you.

"No. But I belong here as much as one; this dress may have confused you. It's deerskin," your words smiled, face staying smooth, creamed golden from inside. From so close your face looked deep, as though the skin on your cheeks was translucent, or not there at all, as though I could look into your flesh, deep deep past your flesh into what it was that made you live. "Two skins sewn at the shoulders and under the arms down to the slits here so I can walk."

And suddenly we were both in the water wading across the stream, me looking over my shoulder to see if I had come from somewhere to here, you carrying my shoes leading me through the sun shafts through the trees to the other bank. Both of us slipping smoothly against the rocks, the water looking clear now not dark, bubbling over stones, frothing between currents. Once you slipped up to your neck and I caught you by the hair. My shoes were the only dry things between us when we reached the other side. The other side where your rocks were laid gently side by side "so you don't knock off the greenness that is supposed to grow on the rocks when they're part of my fireplace."

I remember you wanted me to carry the rocks to the cabin and you would feed me to pay for my working. I had said I was hungry. Why do you want them to be green, all moss grown like that? Won't it die and fall off?

"Not if I water it enough. Whenever the rains come outside I'll water the moss on my rocks inside. I wouldn't want bare rocks in my house; these rocks are alive, they must be to keep the greenness growing. Anything dead needs only to be outside for awhile and it will live again. If I carry some of the rocks and you carry some we'll get them all back in one trip before the darkness . . ."

Comes into the forest like it came into my dead wife's study before I met you with your long tree colored braid, or like it comes into the study now after everything and I am standing alone remembering by this cold mantled fire place resting my head on the cool marble.

"I'm sorry after that long walk you can't see where I'll put my rocks.

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In the morning I'll show you with a bright light to see everything."

Thank you but I have to go back to the lodge after we eat. I have a room there for a month. Tomorrow I'll fish for a week.

"For a week in one day? Put the rocks down here." You were taking my elbow and pulling me carefully in through a doorway to a new part of the forest, facing me in a direction I felt I must have come from once some time ago, and lighting a candle, then a lamp. Light hit bumping gliding over the room into a table standing firmly against the wall, a featherbed folded along the floor in one corner, wide windows screened against "Hummingbirds. They come in when I leave the door open looking for anything sweet. You'll see them tomorrow."

Tomorrow was today somewhere after the trout, or venison, rabbit or carrots and radishes you grew and fed me; after we talked, I talked telling you all I could think of death, how long dying takes for humans, how long it took for my wife.

"But for animals it's quick. Most animals don't get old, They're eaten by the young ones, and the young sick ones by the healthy ones so they don't really die — they live in another way. Like the rocks as moss and the moss as rabbits if the rabbit likes moss. Did you ever see an old rabbit?"

No, I had never seen an old rabbit, or an old blue jay or an old fawn. Perhaps I'll never again see anything old after seeing you with your flickering eyes. There were sparks of yellow in them when you leaned across the wood splinters, gesturing from your wrists, with your elbows on the table.

"Fawns turn into deer and their antlers make them look old if they're bucks."

Will you turn into a deer?

"No. But the deer whose skin this was turned into me, and you too. I wear him and you and I both eat him. It's very simple."

It is very simple, so simple I couldn't think of the complexity you embodied as you pushed dry wood together behind the unrocked hearth opposite the table.

"Except it's not simple with humans." Your braid fell before your shoulder, hung toward the fire as you knelt to light it and I was beside you taking the faggot from your hand, you talking, looking at me, hands pushing against your thighs, fingers pulling the dress down toward your

knees as the splits crept; you stood up. Your bare feet near my knees had the same candle glow gold as your face had a sunlit color.

I lit the fire then and now by the cold marble forehead rest, just to listen to you again, warm the same way in this different place and time. Why isn't it simple?

"Because with humans, with me, we think we'll keep on thinking. I can't imagine only one thing and that's not ever having another thought."

But if you died I'd think of you, I would even think some of your thoughts. Wouldn't that be making them live in a different form, but still alive? Did I say that to you then or am I thinking your thoughts now without ever having spoken of your death?

"No because you don't really know my thoughts as I think them; you know them as I say them and usually that's different especially since I don't talk much and I do think a lot. Sometimes thoughts aren't even thoughts; they're feelings, warm feeling now, cold feeling then. Do you know what I mean?"

You are kneeling again beside me, clutching my shoulders. But that happens later, after the hummingbirds and after the fireplace is finished with well watered moss rocks. You are crying, sobbing, "Do you know what I mean, do you know what I mean? Like the flame in the hearth will go out when the log is gone, my feelings my thoughts will die if you leave. You don't know my thoughts but you cause them. You didn't before you came, or maybe you did, but they're warm now, before they were cold. Doesn't the flame give anything to the log in that hearth, to the candle it fires from?"

Yes, I am saying picking you up lifting you by the arms against me, moving you out of the cabin, pointing you into the night. Yes; what is it the day gives to the sun? And the day to the night? Pushing you against the pine tree to the soil it grows from? What the scent of this night gives to the pine needles under us, your modesty gives to this dress. I kissing you saying, your mouth gives to mine, your breasts to my hands; I taking you saying your body to mine.

Then lying quietly, caressing the pine needles out of your unbraided hair, long dark flowing the color of the night trees and the river, you whispering "the reason to be, the reason to be. But what when the flame is extinguished?" The log, the candle has had its reason to be, is burned

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up, consumed or may be re-kindled if more than ashes or a charred wick remains.

And after a year I stand looking into the cold mantled fire, knowing that even so short a time has consumed me, fine man leg burned by a huge flame into a crumbling ash.

"What happens to the flame, what does it turn into?" you say to me dying. I saying reassuring, hardly believing, it's not simple with humans, but the candle becomes one with the flame; they turn into heat and light, and are dispersed through the universe, and finally reach even that star. And the place where the fire had been is colder, but the whole universe, that very cold place, is much warmer. She saying "At least we don't have to wait for a long time, watching the flame dwindle slowly day by day till the candle is gone."

No, you were blown out yesterday, or was it yesterday my wife died and was buried, yesterday I went to the mountains to be revived from her death and found you and myself. Or are those things happening all only today, echoing among the shadowed books, stepping gently across the rug to the hearth to stoke it and see if there's any wood left to be burned under the cold mantel piece, are the moss-rocks still growing, wondering where there is heat or light in the universe.

JOHN ALVIS

The High-Heeled Lady of Sunshine Nursing Home

In our senior citizens' Elysian halls
A garish lady of carmine ways
Appalls her sisters one and all
With her stylish shoes of candy days.

To all proper measure she gives the lie,
For time has laid his blue skein to her arm.
But there's a scarlet devil in her eye
That sounds among the brethren some alarm.

A blistering sirocco she comes forth
From fox-blood evenings in the South
To burn our cool white house of the North
With the red red crown of her mouth.

The women tell us: "Keep your ease;
Wild suns of Memphis won't shine so strong
On hyperborean reaches such as these.
Here peacocks do not flourish long."

But her quick step rekindles all our fears,
For sometimes rogues, now old blades, long
Blunted from engagements with insistent years,
Spark to the honing of her song.

DIANE CARLSEN

Small Rain at Midnight

I know rain as well as anyone
Can know a thing so silver and still;
I have watched it often, streaming down
The blackness of the street beneath my sill,
Seen it tease the light from corner lamps,
Pretending to swim it away. I've seen it dance
About the old black bones of winter trees
Sick of an annual fear, in sodden trance
Recalling loss, stiffened against the sky.
Empty consolation, and in vain
Its tender attempt at sympathy. I hear
The slow ones now, those last of the smallest rain,
Rhythm themselves on the rusted drain and weep
In gay frustration, singing me to sleep.

Penelope at the Loom

A thousand petty threads weave up the fabric
Of my days, the woof and warp of ways
Once understood, now alien and changed.
Stitches less a pattern fill my loom,
Embroider there a crazy-quilt design;
Tiny stitchings seaming up the time
For the simple sake of sewing heap my room
And gather there, beg to be arranged
In some direction, a reason for the maze
They wander in. A silver prick
From some precise and careless pin
Can wreck the web and draw the threaded tears;
Carefully I turn a torn and blooded hem,
Again begin the red robes of my years.

JUDITH HARRINGTON

Two Whippoorwills

Two whippoorwills calling in the dark
Have practiced separation
Till it's become an art.
Their song, an incandescence,
Scrapes the branches of the night
Till fire flies from friction
And burns the forest into light.

Early Fall

Adam, were the apple blossoms Spring lovely,
and did their perfumed cider cling dry
to fingers in the young time of your earth?
Was Eve's song lilting in the long day?
How did she say the night has come, there's worth
in every moment slept to wake arrayed
in sun? Were there silences between you
when an unmanned person's wordless speech
reflected common glory in each other's face?

Did she move in quiet and ask you to reach
into the tree for white flowers whose future taste
was present scent? Did you sense the danger
and refuse to touch the perfumed blossoms
till Fall would cool them into fruit, changed
from pollen bearers into ransom for a seed?
Adam, Adam, then what happened?
Summer passed, the days grew short,
and Eve's song rang through Eden much less often.

The rest I know from less than kind retort:
Fall came, Eve had changed; she hung,
with the apple, on your arm, wrong for taking
wrong in offering. But you accepted,
held it at a distance, then sang a song
the opposite of all the melodies she'd sung.
You knew too much then, more than Eve could tell,
and finally, hidden in the shadow of the tree,
you ate the apple's other half and held the seed

of God and nations in your hand.
You saw the earth was land and wandered out
to plant your family's ransom, using Eve.
But first, did you look into the leaves
and smell the old long day's warmth.
the cider breeze that swayed Spring's blossoms?
Did you imagine Eve's young earth song —
Then in anger did you break the apple branch
to be assured that one bough dies?

MARY ELLEN SAUSER

To Thomas Erma

"Last week, one of the brightest, most charming young talents in Paris shot himself through the heart."

You, boy in a Russian fur cap,
at a jaunty blue-eyed angle,
caught in a moment's smile —
with paintings piled behind you,
controlled chaos in a geometric heap.
Boy with no horizons,
lifesilver in your hands,
a displaced person
in a world destroyed,
a world you tried to recreate.
Wandering boy, along the razor's edge,
the path that never leads to rest,
need you have sprayed your own heart's
blood onto this canvas?
Did you need to be
your own last masterpiece?

Quasi-Ode on Donne's Saints

(For Godsake hold your tongue, and let me love . . ."
—THE CANONIZATION)

Once, when love was clear as were the skies,
Before a blunter knowing made us wise,
Weak minds and stronger hearts were better welded
Than now, when hearts untimely must be gelded
Till brave new worlds are firm enough established
That lovers may die and quiet brides be ravished.

But still the young and fond ones will refuse
Suspension of the heartbeat for the Muse;
Behooves them much a discipline to enforce,
Yet choose their palsied love than take a course.
No doctor born can chide this form of gout,
Nor chemistry can hiss these candles out.

And yet three centuries have spanned such time
As men could call them saints and so berhyme
The foolishness of urns, and poems, and doves;
No matter how well-wrought, we call it love
And therefore blame it. God, they must be ash
Of phoenix charged to prove their mockers rash.

And so they are, by trivial fires exhumed.
Be not amazed that earth is not yet doomed.
Blame not the lovers' refuge to an urn
Or rhyme; for all that, planets yet will turn.
Time comes when we'll blame more this cold distrust,
When lovers spell salvation in their dust.

JAMES BARTON

To A Pedagogue

Lover first, but in that loving
Teacher;
To one whose book was lost, misplaced, forgotten,
You primed love.
And if learning must be tested in recital,
Then let me read aloud a page or two of notes;
Or, better yet,
Give them back by heart,
As they were taught.

Window Cake

I lie alone upon the earth
cold in the silence of the far-away stars,
and do not know the reason of my "why,"
yet in the vastness of the empty sky
the pages and the stages of the empty man stand
and will not pass by.
The eyes that have never seen still cannot see;
yet they will not close empty,
but stare into the cold
as one stares into the windows
though still the doors are locked
as they always are on empty streets on cold days
when one has seen the cake in the bakery window
and wants in.
Yet still the doors are locked
as the tomb is locked
when one is waiting for the moving of the rock
on misty days, when still it cannot rain,
but only mists.
And who will come to save the hopeless heart
that keeps the vigil in the passing of the dark
that does not pass so swiftly?
And, though, if one should come near,
should I ever hope that he might understand
the sin I have but written in the sand?
One is fearful of one's tongue
mistrusting it the setting of the sun
or the sight of the rainbow that he has never seen,
or others, though they never seem to pass
on the musty bricks that form into a street,
a street that only tolerates the feet

of one who stands before the window-cake
of the locked-door bakery.
And all the doors are locked
that stand as entrance to the stores
whose windows will but tolerate the stares
of lonely men
who lie upon the cold, and stare into the sky
that enunciates the vastness of a tomb
that's just behind the window pane.
The window is a rock, and still the door is locked.
Yet even the stares will but tolerate the one
who is really only wishing that the thing be left undone
and hoping that his wishing is not carried out.
For what should someone think
if he should see one
standing at the window
looking at a cake
or wishing for the moving of a rock?
He would only pass his way in silence
and with a smirk behind his eyes,
entomb me in the silence of the skies
as still the world is silent,
and unborn.

The baker is not up.
This cake will sell as yesterday's.
And if I have the shame to buy it then
the world will still be silently unborn,
the rock still movelessly untorn.
The world will only tolerate the soul
that dares not pound upon the door
nor knock upon the pane,
the soul of someone who has never had the faith
to believe he has a hope.
But they say that God, too, is tolerant.
And politeness is the virtue of the day.
What should I say to these stars that are so far away?
I do not want to hear the baker say "to die"
for I am dead,
and sitting in the tomb
and waiting in the waiting room
wishing there were only room for one.

Dragon

The dragon is a mythical creature,
except to those who've gone to it and seen
fire and scale in its lumbering substance.
Gentle and imaginary, he hunches in the hexagon
of the modern metal desert, reserved for primitive encounter.

Waiting for his private adversary to come,
giant as the distance from the limit of his vision
(sky sifting silver to film the horizon
magicking a white blank unity)
waiting to be patient, slain,
heaped within the lines of his calculated fall.

The dragon quest is ours and will not be denied
to us the person, but before we kill,
he will melt the air in breathing,
roar a broken but mythical roar,
and will stand potent, still, before his monster knight
and bow to the pattern of his sacrifice.

We will have our quest but not a satisfaction.
There is a darkness in passion that is light in negative;
the heaped sediment of myth unbeasted
leaks red upon the metal
and begins its chemistry of corruption.

“Altarwise by Owl-Light”: Sonnets in Spatial

Because of its chaotic imagery and wild cadences, Dylan Thomas' sonnet-sequence "Altarwise by Owl-light" is a poem that attains its ultimate powerful effect well before it can be recognized as intelligible. The poem's insight into its subject—the incarnation, passion, and resurrection of Christ—seems to blaze itself into the imagination immediately. But the apparent confusion of the literal and structural levels of the poem is such that one must question whether the poem is capable of being elucidated or whether the confusion is really what it seems. In other words, is this a successful poem, or does Thomas manage to "pull the wool over our eyes" by his mesmerizing language?

Perhaps no other poet in the English language is comparable to Thomas in his proficiency at "sleight-of-metaphor"; for the poem abounds in mixed or vague metaphors: "hemlock-headed in the wood of weathers" (II), "Cartoon of slashes on the tide-traced crater" (VII), "on rose and icicle the ringing handprint" (VI), are typical examples. Almost as frequent is the use of false epithets and inaccurate modifiers: "penny-eyed" (I), "king of spots" (V), "teats of music" (VII), "gallow grave" (VIII). Often the poet invents words or compounds in which either sound or heavy connotation plays a role in establishing the image: "marrow-ladle" (III), "bread-sided" (IV), "manwax" (VI), "sea-straw" (V), "bagpipe-breasted" (VI), "blowclock" (VIII), "quayrail" (X), "gallow" (VIII), "rockbird" (X). Puns are another frequent device; for example, the word "rung" in the description of Jacob's ladder:

Rung bone and blade, the verticals of Adam,
And manned by midnight, Jacob to the stars. (II)

In the third sonnet, where imagery of seasons and the notion of the Paschal lamb is pervasive, we have "Adam's wether," and by a "rip of the vaults," Christ emerges from the "wrinkled undertaker's van," the

tomb (or womb; in Thomas, the terms are usually interchangeable) like "Rip Van Winkle." In the seventh sonnet, Thomas plays on the words "leaved," "root," "woods" and "words" to present an image of Christ, the Word, on the wood of the Cross:

A Bible-leaved of all the written woods
Strip to this tree: a rocking alphabet,
Genesis in the root, the scarecrow word,
And one light's language in the book of trees.

And in the same sonnet we have the sirens with "teats of music" described as "sea-sawers" rocking on the waves.

Thomas often gives an ingenious twist to a common idiom or to clichés, as "jaw for news" instead of "nose for news" (I), or "The child that sucketh long is shooting up" (II), "My camel's eyes will needle through the shroud" (IV), "And from the windy West came two-gunned Gabriel" (IV), "Suffer the heaven's children through my heartbeat" (VIII). More common figures of speech used by Thomas are hypallage: "queen with a shuffled heart" (V); metonymy: "Jonah's Moby" (V); and synecdoche: "flock of horns" (III).

The imagery in these sonnets is equally complicated. Sexual symbols run rampant, and Thomas is in this respect an offshoot of the tradition of 17th-century metaphysical poets; yet Thomas, rather than using the sexual image as an analogue for divinity, places sex and divinity on the same level. He thus more narrowly misses blasphemy in some of the poems. Even the cross, "pin-legged on pole hills" (V) takes on the character of a phallic symbol. We can trace Thomas' "Jack Christ" (VIII), and "Adam, time's joker" (VI) to Gerard Manley Hopkins' "I am all at once what Christ is . . . / . . . Jack, joke . . ." ("That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire"). Yet the poem contains many motifs that are much less obvious and more complex: complex because the images are not an easily-visualized, clear progression of scenes. Thomas images are presented by a technique that is closely identified with *montage*, except that unlike *montage*, the images usually arise from the language, from the verbal tricks, from the connotations derived from the words rather than from what the words themselves represent. Though Thomas is unique in his style, the idea of this technique is by no means peculiar to Thomas. In this respect, Thomas neatly fits into the tradition of modern poetry. A more lucid explanation is given in Joseph Franks' essay, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature":

Esthetic form in modern poetry . . . is based on a space-logic which demands a complete re-orientation in the reader's attitude

toward language . . . language in modern poetry is really reflexive: the meaning-relationship is completed only by the simultaneous perception in space of word-groups which, when read consecutively in time, have no comprehensible relation to each other . . . modern poetry asks its readers to suspend the process of individual reference temporarily until the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a unity.

The key words here are "space-logic" and "pattern of internal references." With this as a starting point, we may begin to examine some of the motifs, bearing in mind that the "process of individual reference" must be suspended, and we must submit, to use Eliot's phrase, to the "logic of the imagination."

In the first seven sonnets, the religious-sexual symbols are played off against symbols of superstition, magic, and mythology. The poem opens in the twilight, or "owl-light" of creation; the "gentleman," who is Christ, lies "graveward," or in the typically-Thomas position of womb-to-tomb. The mandrake, an ancient symbol of fertility and birth, is "bit out" with "tomorrow's scream." The superstition goes that a mandrake, when pulled up by the root, was supposed to shriek horribly; the "scream" here is the "news" or gospel which the "walking word" was to bring. Christ's divine origin is here represented by the "old cock from nowhere" and the heaven's egg," and he majestically asserts himself as the archetypal microcosm:

I am the long world's gentleman, he said,
And share my bed with Capricorn and Cancer.

We are now in a position to postulate the particular form that this poem possesses; the clue is in the first line of Sonnet II:

Death is all metaphors, shape in one history.

Shape is a major preoccupation of the poem:

What is the metre of the dictionary?
The size of genesis? the short spark's gender?
Shade without shape? the shape of Pharaoh's echo? (IV)

This poem is written in what Frank refers to as the "non-naturalistic style," and the form it takes is "spatial form," where "inherent spatiality . . . is accentuated by the effort to remove all traces of time-value." In this form

The artist abandons the three-dimensional world and returns to the plane, reduces organic nature, including man, to linear-geometrical forms, and frequently abandons the organic world altogether for one of pure lines, forms, and colors.

In this second sonnet, "the planet-ducted pelican of circles"—the pelican is another Christ-symbol—Christ is again given a position in the cosmos analogous to the zodiac, and this position disturbs the horizontal and vertical aspects of creation by setting them up as a ladder by which man will have access to divinity: "Child of the short spark . . . Sets alight a long stick from the cradle," and:

The horizontal cross-bones of Abaddon
You by the cavern over the black stairs,
Rung bone and blade, the verticals of Adam,
And, manned by midnight, Jacob to the stars.

"Abaddon" is hell, the "cavern," and "horizontal crossbones" must be overstepped to reach "the stars" or the zodiacal Christ. The last four lines reduce organic images to these same antinomies; the "hairs" are "roots of nettles" or thorns, "and feathers," signifying divinity, "over these groundworks (Abaddon's) thrusting through a pavement." The last line is a fantastic metaphor for Christ: he is "hemlock-headed," bound for destruction, yet the tree of which he is made is evergreen, "the wood of weathers."

The third sonnet makes a magnificent pun on Christ as the "lamb," and Adam as a bell-wether in the "flock of horns," or fallen man in his devilish state: Christ is sometimes referred to as the second Adam. Here the "three dead seasons" are equally applicable to the long time that passed between Adam and Christ, or to the nine-months preceding the birth of Christ, or to the three days before the resurrection: Christ is in a "timeless cradle." The zodiac again appears in the "black ram, shuffling of the year, old winter." Spring comes, and the ladder image of Sonnet II again reconciles the horizontal-vertical "antipodes, and twice spring chimed." The chime arises from the ladder "rung" and the bell of the "weter," or Aries, the spring constellation.

Sonnet IV is a digression, a sort of inquiry, or possibly the poet's attempt to probe his own insight into a mystery. The imagery is predominantly sexual, although perhaps it is not too far-fetched to say the "sixth of wind" refers to the Holy Spirit, who "blew out" the vigil fires of those who waited for the Messiah. The "bamboo man" refers to the "long stick" of Sonnet II. The barrenness of "boneyards" and "splinters" and the hollowness of "bamboo" are appropriate to the sterility of the period preceding the Incarnation, or even to the Crucifixion. In the latter case, the "crooked boy" in the "boneyards" is Christ at Golgotha. The "poker-marrow" refers back to the "marrow-

ladle," an image connoting nourishment or the shape of a particular bone; Christ's body, of which the marrow is the inmost part, served to nourish and revive fallen man. On the cross the bones were stiff as a poker, and the word "poker" likewise prefigures the card-imagery in Sonnet V. The line "my camel's eyes will needle through the shroud" is a confusion of the New Testament axiom of the difficulty of attaining heaven, but by the "shroud" of Christ's death, man can "needle through." The last four lines are unintelligible except that they seem to connote a kind of camera-eye-view of the images to follow: "reflection," "stills snapped," "close-up," and the brilliancy of the birth-death paradox, "arc-lamped," is cut by the "flood," which has no reference until Sonnet V, in the "climbing sea from Asia" and "Jonah's Moby," which links Christ's entombment to the prophet Jonah, and again to Adam:

Cross-stroked salt Adam to the frozen angel
Pin-legged on pole-hills with a black medusa
By waste seas where the white bear quoted Virgil
And sirens singing from our lady's sea-straw.

All of this seems to depict Christ's life as a sort of epic journey (if we connect Virgil here with the *Aeneid* and take the polar bear as merely another image of waste, like the "frozen angel," to set off a stark contrast with the "black medusa.") This journey is made by "cross-strokes," (Adam and Christ are grafted on the cross, Christ is swimming through time); These graft the myth (the "sirens" and "medusa") to Christ's act which ransoms man from the blackness of magic. This montage sheds some light on the obscure end of sonnet IV, for we now see the snapshot-like flashes of the effects of Christ's career, which may be further projected to Sonnet VII. Here the sirens again appear, and with them, the bell-wether Adam, ransomed by this act of cross-stroking time from "magic":

The scaled sea-sawers, fix in a naked sponge
Who sucks the bell-voiced Adam out of magic,
Time, milk, and magic from the world beginning.
Time is the tune my ladies lend their heartbreak.

The ladies' "heartbreak" links the sirens to the women at the cross mourning "from our lady's sea-straw." The "milk" permits us to cast the entire image into another point in time, Christ in his infancy, where he "slew . . . hunger" under his mother's "milky mushrooms." The apparent irrelevance of the time-element in this poem is an essential characteristic of spatial form, for when "objects are presented in one plane," says Frank, "their simultaneous apprehension as part of a time-

less unity is obviously made easier."

The card-imagery previously alluded to occurs at the beginning of Sonnet V, in a brilliant tour-de-force in which Thomas assigns Gabriel at the Annunciation the role of a drunken, gun-slinging Maverick who views Mary as the "queen with a shuffled heart." Rather than blasphemy, the effect is that of the proper apprehension Mary must have felt at the news "from salvation's bottle."

Sonnet VI is an extended metaphor of the birth, or death, of the Word, and its further consequences on the medusa and siren. The sonnet begins with the disturbing "Cartoon of slashes on the tide-traced crater," which again makes sense if we relate the "cartoon of slashes" to the snapshots of Sonnet IV, which were "thrown back upon the cutting flood" at this ambiguous moment. The Word is submerged in a metaphor of the candle: "wick of words," "wax's tower," again the vertical image of the "long world's gentleman." We are again on the seas of the sirens and medusa, whose eye is plucked out by love, the "old cock from nowhere," who, just as obligingly, "lopped the minstrel tongue" of the "stinging sirens." The process of the burning candle "burned sea-silence on a wick of words," while Adam, "time's joker," yet enthralled by the world of magic, the "witch of cardboard," plays a fortunetelling game in which he discovers "the seven seas, an evil index," the meaning of which is not revealed until the final sonnet. The end of Sonnet VI is another horrifying image of birth or death:

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

Much of the seventh sonnet has already been discussed; its subject is the impact of the "scarecrow word" on the cross: "Stamp the Lord's Prayer on a grain of rice," again a cliché having other-than-usual import. The microcosmic world is stamped throughout the macrocosm, in places of emptiness and plenty, earth and sky, beauty and barrenness:

From bald pavilions and the house of bread
Time tracks the sound of shape on man and cloud,
On rose and icicle the ringing handprint.

The most powerful, as well as the most intelligible, of the sonnets is the eighth, beginning:

This was the crucifixion on the mountain,
Time's nerve in vinegar, the gallow grave,
As tarred with blood as the bright thorns I wept;
The world's my wound, God's Mary in her grief,

Bent like three trees and bird-papped through her shift,
With pins for teardrops is the long wound's woman.

The word "was" justifies our equation of the previous sonnets' birth and death images. Here we begin to perceive a sort of progression in the poem. The absence of images from the dark magical world in this and the sonnets to follow is accounted for by the fact that Christ has died, and the lusty siren and serpentine medusa have been banished from existence. The mother stands by the cross, weeping "bright thorns," "pins for teardrops," at the "long wound" of her son. "Time's nerve" brings to mind both the sensitivity and the bravery of the moment. The "gallow grave" connotes all together the ignominy (gallows), sacredness (hallow), and heaviness (tallow-"tarred") of the crucifixion. The geometric images appear again with the "minstrel angle" driving the "heaven-driven" nails, which remind us of the ladder of Sonnet II, as "all glory's saw-bones" of "rung bone and blade." The "three-colored rainbow" refers both to the Trinity and the triple crucifixion, which alike aroused the earth from both "antipodes": "from pole to pole leapt round the snail-waked world." The horror of the death of divinity is heightened by the death of its counterpart in this poem, sex: "Unsex the skeleton this mountain minute"; and the sun becomes a "blowclock witness" to the death of time at this moment, a "blow" to the meaning of time.

The ninth sonnet relates the entombed Christ to the entombed royalty of archaeology's "oracular archives":

Prophets and fibre kings in oil and letter,
The lamped calligrapher, the queen in splints,
Buckle to lint and cloth their natron footsteps,
Draw on the glove of prints, dead Cairo's henna,
Pour like a halo on the caps and serpents.
This was the resurrection in the desert . . .

This "juxtaposition of past and present" is another characteristic of Frank's spatial form. The above lines can be applied to his comment on this "blowclock" aspect:

. . . history becomes unhistorical: it is no longer seen as an objective, casual progression in time, with distinctly marked-out differences between each period, but is sensed as a continuum in which distinctions between past and present are obliterated . . . past and present are seen spatially, locked in a timeless unity which, while it may accentuate surface differences, eliminate any feeling of historical sequence by the very act of "juxtaposition."

Thus, Christ's wounded body is that of every man's at death; though the shroud was all that remained after the resurrection, the "linen spirit" still

Weds my long gentleman to dusts and furies
With priest and pharaoh bed my gentle wound.

Again the "gentleman" asserts himself as microcosm: "world in the sand," whose memorials of his epic quest of redemption are "stones of odyssey," a phallic symbol, yet more suggestive of gravestones, or, even better, millstones; the burden of man's guilt Christ carried to the grave, like "rivers of the dead around my neck." The "triangle landscape" links the pyramids in this sonnet to the "three-colored rainbow" of the previous one. The *montage* of archaeological "snapshots" obliterates, like the "blowclock witness of the sun" and the "arc-lamp," the value of time and serves as an "objective correlative," however imperfect it may be, for eternity.

In the tenth and final sonnet we have the consequences of Adam's prognostication of the "evil index". The word, the "book of trees," or gospel, has indeed "spelt the seven seas." This sonnet is the poet's "Christian voyage," in which the Gospel is carried by ships, "winged harbours," and "rockbirds," the successors of Peter and the Holy Spirit:

Let the tale's sailor from a Christian voyage
Atlaswise hold half-way off the dummy bay.
Time's ship-racked gospel on the globe I balance:
So shall winged harbours through the rockbirds' eye
Spot the blown word . . .

Like the stamp of the "ringing handprint," the word, "December's thorn" for the month of birth and the crown of death, is imaged "on the seas." The "tall fish swept from the Bible-East" is the "long gentleman," who is likewise the "rhubarb" and "bamboo man", green now in the spring of redemption, who sows his word, the "flying garden":

Green as beginning, let the garden diving
Soar, with its two bark towers, to that Day
When the worm builds with the gold straws of venom,
My nest of mercies in the rude, red tree.

So the "long world's gentleman's" swimming journey is climaxed by the "diving" into death; the act is a continual soaring to the Day when the mystery of the "two bark towers," the cross and its victim, will be unfolded. The last two lines bear the "felix culpa" motif: The "worm,"

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the serpent of the "garden time," who built "gold straws of venom in Eden's red-apple tree, made possible the "rude, red tree" of the gospel-cross (or rood, read "book of trees").

We can say, finally, that a unity does emerge from this poem; the total image, however, is untranslatable, and all we can say of it is that we see Thomas' time-worn subject in a character of timelessness that affects the sensibility in a manner which could not have been accomplished before the arrival of the modern poets. The unity is compounded of all the inter-related patterns of image and language, and not of a logically comprehensible narrative structure. We realize that the form it takes is "spatial form," the techniques whereby time-sequence and scene-sequence are erased and order is constructed from the fragmentary experiences within the poem that make their own unconscious connections in the imagination. This is the "mythical method" of which Eliot speaks in "Ulysses, Order, and Myth": "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a signifi-ance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." And this, indeed, Thomas has done, successfully and magnificently.

Sincerity and the Balance of Tension in Poetry

Matthew Arnold states that one of the requisites for great poetry is the quality of "high Seriousness." By this term he means a suitably "poetic" subject, one which is not frivolous or inconsequential, and one which is born of what he calls "absolute sincerity." One cannot agree fully with Mr. Arnold's idea of a "poetic subject," since, if a subject conforms to his particular concept of what is serious, then all poetry of wit and comedy, much of Donne and Chaucer, would have to be discarded, and it is difficult to believe that we would be justified in such an exclusion. (Arnold simply misunderstood the nature of comedy; though he knew the depths of sorrow and melancholy, he obviously did not understand the depths and importance of its opposite.) However, his idea of "absolute sincerity" is quite interesting, and it may be profitable to extend it somewhat. By absolute sincerity, Arnold means the expression of something that is deep within man, basic and common to him, something far beneath the moralistic and didactic, the posing, the front which man assumes as a protection of his individualism, something that is a property of the soul perhaps, rather than of the rational intellect.

For this reason, then, all efforts at establishing a poetry which can serve as a criticism of life or a "message" fail as poetry; it is important only as history, and cannot be called poetry at all, but only rhymed preaching and metered daydreaming. Didacticism, sentimentality, and overidealization fail, always, as poetry because they are not a true expression of man as he is, but as he thinks he *ought* to be. An absolutely sincere expression will be an expression of a *valid* situation, an expression not of an impossibility, but of possibility, not of what ought to happen, but as Aristotle says, what does happen, what might happen.

There seems to be some vital connection between this idea of absolute

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sincerity and Allen Tate's concept of "tension" in poetry. While Tate deals for the most part with the technicalities of poetry and Arnold is concerned with the more abstruse theme, nevertheless, the two ideas are quite closely connected, and in a good poem, one leads necessarily to the other.

Tate defines tension as "all the extensions and intensions that we can find" in a poem. In other words, tension is everything that is included in the poem, all the levels of meaning, all the images, all the connotations and denotations of language, all the paradoxical elements, everything that makes the poem whole, and formed. It is the *full, organized body* of the poem. But perhaps this must be amended somewhat; actually, tension as Mr. Tate defines it, is more of a means to the end of poetry, rather than the end itself.

Cleanth Brooks states that the method of science is direct, while the method of art is always and necessarily indirect. The poet must take his material as he finds it, he must work with material that is by its very nature filled with conflicts and paradoxes. The feelings and attitudes he expresses are unwieldy and ambiguous, they have many seemingly disparate and disorganized qualities, forces which seem to pull from all sides at once, resisting any kind of order. Thus, the tension is already there, inherent in the raw material. What the poet must do is take an experience, with all its inherent tensions, and attempt to express and order that experience not by eliminating those tensions, but by reconciling them and putting them into a balance. The tensions are still contained within the poem, but the poet has handled them in such a precise way as to attain a perfect balancing-out of power, and this balance of resisting forces is what gives the poem body, and ultimately, form.

The connection between Arnold's idea of absolute sincerity and the balance of tension is this: If the poem rises from a valid situation, one which is free from didacticism or sentimentality, then the raw material of the situation will contain valid tensions, and the poem will achieve a valid balance. In the attempt to achieve this valid balance of tension, the poet will of necessity be inclined to avoid the irrelevance, sentimentality, and over-idealizing which bespeaks an insincerity of situation. The two cannot be separated; they are contained in, and lead to, one another.

Ransom's poem "The Equilibrists" may serve as a case in point. The

basic conflict around which the entire poem radiates is deftly constructed in the first two lines:

Full of her long white arms and milky skin,
He had a thousand times remembered sin.

This is no ordinary woman, but one with "long white arms," more goddess than human, more ideal than real. And this is no ordinary relationship between the two, but one which reminds the lover of "sin." He is saturated with her, yet constantly aware of the fact that their union is for some reason forbidden. "Alone in the press of people," outside and above the rest of humanity, the lover moves on as in a daze, thinking only of his beloved, her "jacinth and myrrh, and ivory."

The situation here is a dangerous one for the poet. He has set up a conflict between love and honor, good and evil, the ideal and the real. He can either accept the situation as it is and work with that, or he can try to force a moral or escape into the esoteric, thereby violating the honor of the situation itself.

The tensions and conflicts set up in the first stanza are enlarged upon in stanzas 2-5. The lover remembers the mouth of his beloved, "that quaint orifice" with its flaming, passionate kiss and chilling words. He remembers her beautiful body, "a white field ready for love." But the lush field where lilies grow is shadowed over and made cold and dark by the "gaunt tower above," that "officious tower" of her mind, from which grey doves come flying, "Honor, Honor, they came crying." The physical is played off against the mental, real human love and desire against one cold word, "Honor," an abstract term, five letters in an alphabet, that must keep them forever separated. We feel the frustration of the pair most acutely and sympathize completely. The lover doesn't care for his beloved's moralizing and abstraction; she doesn't want to moralize, but knows she must. She loves him in spite of herself, and in spite of herself, she must tell him to go. The lover sees a vast difference between what her mouth speaks and what her eyes are saying: "Never mind the cruel words / Embrace my flowers but not embrace the swords." The lover desires nothing more than to do just this. He feels as we do that those "cruel words" are "importunate," "too pure," "too wise," too abstract for this situation. And yet, words do have meaning, they have been spoken aloud, they "clamber on his shoulder," saying "arise, arise." They must be respected. The strain is too much for the lady, and her speech is strangely dramatic and theatrical, her words too pure:

Leave me now, and never let us meet;

Eternal distance now command thy feet.

The tension has reached a feverish pitch, and the reader feels as much anguish as the lovers themselves.

Here the real artistry of the poet enters. Rather than end the poem at this point, which would leave reader and lovers in unbearable pain, he breaks in as speaker, and cries out for us, "Predicament indeed!" He removes us as reader from the center of action and speaks our pain for us, taking the frustration upon himself, so that our burden is not so heavy. He continues to explicate the predicament, and by explanation and analysis makes clear what it is that hurts us so much, thereby alleviating much of our hurt. He tells us that the lovers, after the crisis of decision has passed, have come into a "torture of equilibrium." The lovers still are in terrible pain, they do not forget their pain, but they have brought it into balance. They are seen from a distance now through the use of a metaphysical conceit, "rigid as two painful stars, and twirled/About the clustered night their prison world."

"Ah, the strict lovers, they are ruined now!" The poet expresses his anger as well as ours. But he realizes that there is nothing else the lovers can do. He addresses them as representative of all humanity: "Man, what would you have?" He knows that there is no solution, no chance for the union of the lovers, not even after death, though indeed that will be a "kinder saeculum." The problem is presented to them clearly:

Would you ascend to Heaven and bodiless dwell?
Or take your bodies honorless to Hell?

These two people love each other wholly and entirely; but there is no sexual union to be had in Heaven, no spiritual union in Hell. There is no solution, save maintaining forever this terrible equilibrium. The speaker still watches them, "spinning, orbited nice." Calmly, sadly, he digs their epitaph in the "quiet earth."

*Equilibrists lie here; stranger, tread light;
Close, but untouching in each other's sight;
Mouldered the lips and ashy the tall skull,
Let them lie perilous and beautiful.*

Ransom has presented a valid situation in the poem. He has successfully avoided moralizing about the lovers, or being didactic about their relationship. He does not condemn their love, nor make it less beautiful than it is. There is no tampering with their particular personalities. He does not force them into moral molds or preconceived conclusions. Ran-

som also avoids the temptation to sentimentalize the situation, resulting in the "happy ending." Nor do the lovers desire this simple a "solution," a solution which would only lessen the importance of their relationship. Rather, the poet lets them keep their pain and their nobility. He allows them to be what they truly are, "perilous and beautiful" in their perfect balance.

The entire poem, with "all the extensions and intensions we can find" is also "orbited nice." The poet has handled the raw material of the poem so precisely, with all its connotations, denotation, images and metaphors, that a beautiful work has been created. He has not eliminated any of the tensions which existed in language or situation, but has manipulated them in such a precise manner as to reconcile them perfectly. The tensions are still present, allowing the reader to develop level after level of meaning. The poem will still hold together, still have complete unity. It will not disintegrate upon a deeper penetration than the literal level. It is this reconciliation, this balance of tensions which gives "The Equilibrists" its unity and what must finally be termed "form." If the poet had not approached the situation of the equilibrists with humility, if he had not been so completely honest and sincere about the lovers *for themselves alone*, he could not possibly have balanced the conflicts which existed therein. And if he had not achieved this balance of tensions so precisely, he would have run the very grave risk of violating the honor of the lovers, and ultimately, the honor and integrity of his poem.

JAMES D'AVIGNON

The City of Man

A Review of William F. Lynch, *Images of Hope*, Baltimore: Garamond Pridemark Press, 1965.

To an age which, as he comments, is "passing through a period of fascination with despair," Fr. Lynch proposes the need for psychology of hope. "Hope" in our present culture is a word of ill repute: "As we use language," writes Fr. Lynch, "when we say a man has hope, we mean that he is in serious trouble." In his latest book, *Images of Hope*, Fr. Lynch develops a theory of hope designed to answer the modern disillusionment and to afford a realistic study of the problem of mental illness in today's culture.

Hope as Fr. Lynch understands it is vitally connected with the imagination. Imagination, he writes, is the way in which we place our present difficulties in their proper context, superseding without transcending them. Hope, in other words, with its attendant imagination, is, according to Fr. Lynch, "the gift that envisions what cannot yet be seen, the gift that constantly proposes to itself that the boundaries of the possible are wider than they seem."

Inherent in the nature of hope is the concept of creative waiting: of the ability to remain fixed upon a goal, accepting the needs and realities of all intermediate worlds without yielding to them. This positive waiting is seen in contrast to the waiting which is apathy, waiting which, as Fr. Lynch notes, "has forgotten what it wishes, and is just waiting." Fr. Lynch believes that the modern world is imbued with this passive waiting, and has become a midway world between hope and hopelessness. "In our generation," he writes, "we make fun of people who hope and we put people in hospitals who do not hope."

Any discussion of hope must of necessity take its opposite, hopelessness, into consideration. Fr. Lynch recognizes the reality of the element of

hopelessness and declares that it holds a permanent place in the human reality. It is important that we recognize hopelessness in our lives but, according to Fr. Lynch, there is nothing wrong with hopelessness as long as it does not contaminate hope. As G. K. Chesterton said about wine: "I don't care where the water goes if it doesn't get into the wine." Hopelessness will cause no trouble if it doesn't get into the hope. Hopelessness forms its own closed world, based, as Fr. Lynch asserts, on three basic assumptions: hopelessness assumes that there are no interior resources available to man in time of difficulty; it imagines no possibility of help; even if there were interior resources and available help, hopelessness sees no good, no sense to life.

To recapitulate briefly, hope is based on a realistic evaluation of life and on the ability to imagine new possibilities. Hope is fostered by the act of wishing and achieved by positive waiting. It is expansive, permitting man to see one moment in its true relationship with all other moments. Hopelessness, on the other hand, is contractive, tending to concentrate on the part rather than on the whole. It is based not on the real world but on hallucinations — fantasy worlds which have no contact with actuality. Hopelessness succumbs to apathy, the curse of the modern world.

One of the chief causes of mental illness today, according to Fr. Lynch, is something he calls the "absolutizing instinct," the tendency to set up arbitrary absolutes and to regard life in the light of these false absolutistic norms. When the reality fails to measure up it is repressed and the dissenting thought is driven into the subconscious where it gradually spreads and contaminates the entire consciousness. To combat this tendency, Fr. Lynch declares, we must be willing to realize what is present in actuality without becoming obsessed by it. Either to ignore contrary feelings entirely or to become unduly engrossed in them results in the formation of a fantasy world in which the mind becomes trapped, unable to extricate itself.

It is precisely at this point of autistic involvement, Fr. Lynch writes, that the irony of the modern world exerts its full force. Now, when the mentally ill person most needs the aid and understanding of society; when he has lost sight of his humanity and is helpless, dependent on an external influence in order to regain his proper perspective, now it is that society classifies him as non-human and places him outside the pale of our civilization.

We must not thus reject those most in need of our understanding, insists Fr. Lynch. We must build a city of man, in which all men have

Kerygma

citizenship, rather than construct various walled absolutistic cities which exclude portions of humanity, for, as Fr. Lynch writes:

... one of the great hopes of all men is that they shall be human and belong to the city of man — and one of the great sources of our hopelessness will come from these rigid and absolutized, these non-human constructions that lead to the self-enclosure of despair.

Images of Hope is a significant document in a branch of study which society has deemed somewhat less than completely respectable and which is, consequently, sadly in need of documentation and analysis. Philosopher, theologian, and literary critic, Fr. Lynch is one of the few authors today willing to treat the subject of hope in a serious and realistic manner, freeing hope of the unfortunate pejorative connotations invested in it by a frightened age and opening it to examination and discussion. *Images of Hope*, furthermore, is not only an important landmark of our times but is also a very readable and fascinating explication of a vital basic issue of contemporary culture.

JOHN ALVIS

To the Electric Garden from the Babel of Print

A Review of Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, McGraw-Hill, 1964.

The intellectual life of Herbert Marshall McLuhan appears to have the makings for acute schizophrenia. As an English professor at St. Michael's College he must teach literacy, but as Director of the Institute of Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto and as a social critic he has been busy for the last five years writing books which proclaim that literacy has been the central factor in splitting the sensibility of Western man. McLuhan's belief is that the technology of the phonetic alphabet intensified by the development of print has reorganized man's senses so that the highly literate suffer under an autocracy of the eye that atrophies the other organs of sensation and makes for general numbness of experience. This was the burden of his *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and it is one of the pivotal theses in his *Understanding Media* (1964). McLuhan's latest book is an attempt to create an inclusive myth that will explain the history of the West in terms of changes in its media.

For McLuhan *media* includes not only the forms of communication — print, movies, radio, television — but in general any socially affective technology; *Understanding Media* deals with clocks and games and motorcars in addition to the more familiar communications media. They are all, he maintains, extensions of the body or some function of a sense organ — the wheel is an extension of the feet in rotary motion, the phonetic alphabet is an extension of the eye.

It is not an oversimplification to say that McLuhan sees history as the process of man's extending himself into the world of objects through the agency of an ever more complicated technology. Understanding media begets an understanding of history because it is the medium that "shapes

and controls the scale and form of human association and action." McLuhan makes over and over again the point that "the medium is the message" and that its message is in fact the change in scale or pace of human association that its use effects.

Lynn White, Jr. has called this method the study of history through "sub-history." The usual method of the historian is to study human action through documents, on the supposition that the most important things about a people are those things they think important enough to embody in art or put down in communal records. The sub-historian works rather with what a people may use everyday and never consciously evaluate. The effects of a technology on a culture are subliminal, he maintains, but they are substantial, and it may even be that the form of a culture as well as the habits of mind peculiar to it are best understood as metaphors for its technological base. Thus Mr. White can say that the Middle Ages were the social extension of the stirrup, and McLuhan can hold in his turn that Nationalism, mass production, the assembly line, and the stag line were caused by the printing press.

McLuhan has become the outstanding voice in a school of social analysts who make use of this methodology and who have been engaged during the last decade in developing a theory of the present to deal with contemporary social problems. The most important result of their research has been the anthology *Explorations in Communication* (1960) edited by McLuhan and Edmund Carpenter. The writers included in this anthology share in an almost messianic insistence on the need for an increased understanding of the radical effects of electric technology on the modern sensibility. They maintain that we live one way yet continue to think in another. They share also a strange prose style that attempts to break through the barrier of print by creating a "mosaic" cluster of insights and supporting data that tends to baffle logical analysis. A glance at the prose of McLuhan's literary essays of pre-media days is enough to confirm the impression one gets in reading *Understanding Media* that here is a book straining towards a new mode of exposition. The work has no beginning, middle, or end; rather it has the form of a concentric spiral tracing over and over the same theme with little regard for the contingencies of logic or the demands of thorough scholarship. It reads like, and was probably intended to be, a practical joke on the linear, literate mind; but the form has a more serious purpose in that it forces the reader into accepting McLuhan's central message by fairly bludgeoning him over the head with the medium. He is made to learn through exasperation if nothing else that the medium is at least *a* message.

Understanding Media is an encyclopedic work; it tries to treat a multitude of familiar things in terms of a totally new point of view in the hope that manifold insights will compose of themselves into an inclusive picture. With a little help from McLuhan the insights do add up to form a myth of history and a judgement on the current situation that is considerably askew of the interpretations given by most modern commentators.

McLuhan is almost unique in his optimism. He stands apart from such thinkers as Spengler, Eliot, Riesman, Tate, Weaver, Guardini, and Voegelin because he sees the electric age as panacea for the psychic ills attendant on the linear and mechanized era of print. For McLuhan the electric technologies of the present age promise the integral life which was once man's portion in the tribal state but which has been progressively dessicated by the growth of an analytic awareness in perception just now beginning to disappear. All other media have been partial extensions of the body but the electric technology is an extension of the central nervous system itself and thus a reintegration of the human sensorium.

Whether McLuhan's electric apocalypse is a reality or only an attractive dream is a question that deserves serious consideration and commentary from all sectors of the intellectual spectrum. If he is right, considerable reorganization of our thoughts on art, education, economics, policies and history is in order. If he is, as seems more probable, only partially clear in his vision, he has nonetheless established a new approach to the understanding of culture that must be incorporated in any synthesis which aims to be whole.



