

CONFRONTING OPPOSITES OPTIMISTICALLY WITH DYLAN THOMAS

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RESUMEN

La oscuridad es una de las características de la poesía de Dylan Thomas. Para 1934, sus versos ya se habían tornado "impenetrables para el lector común" (Ferris 1977: 105). La oscuridad se abre paso en su mundo poético siguiendo un "modelo parabólico que alcanza su punto de máxima opacidad entre 1936 y 1938" (Moynihan 1966: 63).

El siguiente análisis ejemplifica la difícil experiencia de escritores y lectores a través de la oscuridad por medio de opuestos como vida y muerte, justicia e injusticia, apatía y amor. Asumir el reto de esta experiencia es provechoso. La oscuridad en el caso de Thomas se vuelve "un signo formal de lucha, y la lucha era, a su vez, una metáfora de la vida" (Moynihan 1966: 53). Así pues, la coexistencia y confrontación de los opuestos desplegados en los tres poemas elegidos para este artículo pueden guiar al lector indudablemente a ver la vida, en su totalidad, desde un punto de vista más optimista.

ABSTRACT

Obscurity is one well-known characteristic of Dylan Thomas's poetry. By 1934, his verse had already become "impenetrable to the ordinary reader" (Ferris 1977: 105). Obscurity made its way into his poetic world following a "parabolic pattern with the height of the opacity occurring during the years 1936-1938" (Moynihan 1966: 63).

And the following analysis exemplifies the writer's and the reader's struggling experience through obscurity between contrasting phenomena such as life and death, justice and injustice, apathy and love. But undertaking this challenge is promising. Obscurity in Thomas' case became "a formal sign of struggle, and struggle was, in turn, a metaphor for life" (Moynihan 1966: 53). Thus, the coexistence and confrontation of opposites as displayed by him in the three poems chosen for this article can certainly lead the reader to view life, as a whole, from a more optimistic angle.

Dark is a way and light is a place
Heaven that never was
Nor will be ever is always true.
"Poem on His Birthday"

My poetry is, or should be, useful
to me for one reason: it is the
record of my individual struggle
from darkness toward some measure
of light.

Dylan Thomas

Obscurity was a characteristic of the romantic poetry (Moynihan 1966: 24) of the Welsh, Dylan Thomas (1914-1953). Paul Ferris points out the fact that before 1934 its meanings were not clear but they were still considered acceptable (1978: 105). However, from 1934 on, his verse became "impenetrable to the ordinary reader," (1978: 105) and Thomas himself became aware of this fact. On May, 1934, once he had finished a poem, he wrote a letter to Pamela H. Johnson, his first serious girl friend. In it, he openly said, "I am getting more obscure day by day. I shall never be understood" (Ferris 1978: 105). By 1936, compression had already reached "a point where his language implied so much that it seemed to say nothing" (Moynihan 1966: 52). Obscurity settled in following "a parabolic pattern with the height of the opacity occurring during the years 1936-1938" (Moynihan 1966: 63). And *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas* is a very good source for tracing this pattern. It can be considered to be, in Moynihan words, "an accurate chronological representation of Thomas's poetry" (1966: 63).

But so much compression should not be considered to be discouraging. In spite of the fact it has its taxing effect upon the reader's understanding of a poem, the interaction between both entities, reader-poem, can be successful when it is based upon an attitude of the reader which Thomas also knew quite well. As Moynihan (1966: 52) points out, "he expected his poems to create some kind of immediate personal response, but more important, he expected sincere readers to take time to work through his "artifices and obscurities."

And this patient approach will pay itself off. For obscurity in Thomas "was a formal sign of struggle, and struggle was, in turn, a metaphor for life" (Moynihan 1966: 53). Therefore, to experience this paradox in a series of paradoxes present in three of the poems from his obscure period, namely, "The Force that Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" (1934), "The Hand that Signed the Paper" (1934), both ranked among his best, too, (Moynihan 1966: 53) and "When All My Five and Country Senses See," makes any personal, time-consuming effort through obscurity be worthwhile.

Thomas also signalled a path for reaching his created world. He clearly sentenced once, "only the printed page, or the interior monologue, or private discussion is able to give the poem the time it is justified in asking" (Moynihan 1966: 52). And the following analysis takes into account his good and well-intended suggestions, hoping his poetry may turn out to be what it meant to be for him, "a movement from darkness toward some measure of light" (Fitz-Gibbon 1965: 142). His confrontation with universal contrasting phenomena: life and death, justice and injustice, apathy and love, for example, well reflected in the poems chosen, have become a good source of creative tensions; first, upon Thomas himself; and then upon his readers, who choose to follow the path he patiently wrought, expecting to get some light on a living experience characterized by puzzling, and many times painful, coexistence of opposites.

In "The Force that Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower," Thomas expresses an absolute: opposite forces dwell and operate simultaneously in our universe. In this poem, man is pictured as being part of a gigantic world in which an all-powerful might is infusing energy to objects and people alike, and which at the same, is carrying that energy away. Renewal and decay appear to be beyond nature's control. The poet places himself at the center of nature, and nature becomes his teacher. Nature, he observes, and man have things in common. They both undergo the same physical transformations; no object and no man are meant to be unchanged for ever; the power coming from that "force" changes them both.

In the first stanza he observes a flower, which in this context could be a rose. This image in turn brings out a feeling of plenitude. A whole process of growth has taken place and the flower has finally faced life. The poet sees a similarity between himself and that daughter of nature, associating in this way man to the natural world. He is, he says, in his "green age", words which evoke the plenitude life reaches during the summertime. But immediately we are reminded of the fact that state of fullness leads to physical transformation. In words that strike the reader's awareness on the coexistence of life and death, the poet makes him/her conscious of the opposite effects of that force upon this universe,

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
 Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
 Is my destroyer.
 And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
 My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.
 (Thomas 1971: 10)

That unseen power carries life away without any mercy, blasting the roots of that which has life. Likewise, that force becomes a destroyer of man; it constantly carries man's life away.

Thomas helps the reader see how life and death dwell together in the same object or person. Even when something is in its climax of development, he suggests, the seed of decay is at work there. Combining images of youth and beauty implied in the word rose, he also calls it a "crooked rose," as a token of the future of that flower, its eventual disappearance. In the same way, youth does not stand by itself; it is permeated by the transient quality characteristic of life on earth. Even in youth, there is also a "wintry fever," he says, that keeps carrying man to his end.

The poem turns out to be a poem of parallelisms. All the beauty of nature springs out in the words the poet uses to transmit his ideas. All that power and vitality of the external world and its intimate relation to man are expressed, for instance, in the word "water," an element as basic to man's existence as blood itself is,

The force that drives the water through the rocks
 Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams
 Turns mine to wax.
 And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins
 How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.
 (Thomas 1971: 10)

Those lines clearly picture how both indispensable liquids for man's life on earth are pushed forward by that same unseen, but intuitively apprehended power, present in the universe. It is a power that man can perceive for it is always at work in the world around him and in himself; its effects reach him, too.

The poet also sees that force as a hand. For the believer, the image of God emerges. And God, indeed, was present in Thomas' world. In the poem "In the Beginning," for instance, God is described as "the ribbed original of love." And according to William T. Moynihan, such description is "an early indication of Thomas' final affirmation of 'great/ And fabulous,

dear God,' and the weeping God of 'In Country Heaven' (1966: 173). In the case of "The Force that Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower," that hand is almighty. It is capable of causing motion or stability, of whirling "the water of the pool" or of stirring the quicksand.

That hand causes the wind, a good symbol of movement, of life. But immediately, the poet reminds the reader, it causes death. As he says, it "Hauls my shroud sail." Therefore, the force at work in nature will be the same one that will make his life cease,

The hand that whirls the water in the pool
Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind
Hauls my shroud sail.
And I am dumb to tell the hanging man
How of my clay is made the hangman's lime.
(Thomas 1971: 10)

Life, Thomas reminds us, is a ceaseless movement carrying out opposites. It brings forth life, and paradoxically, the same number of times, it brings forth death.

And more paradoxes are displayed in the world of this poem. Even time, something which is abstract, becomes personified. It emerges as a destructive agent with lips that "leech the fountain head" (st. 4, line 16). There is pain, and, therefore, "love drips and gathers" (l. 17), but the hand that caused so much pain will also bring peace, "the fallen blood/ shall calm her sores" (ll. 17-8).

And what could the poet say when he is in front of the lover's tomb? What is he reminded of, then? Certainly, he cannot utter a word to the tomb or to the dead, but he and the reader can end up thinking of their own fate; life is meant for death. The poet's awareness becomes the reader's: "And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb/ How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm" (stanza 5), he says. The sheet is a reminder of man's own fate. One day it will no longer provide him warmth –life; it will eventually become a cold companion in his tomb. The poem, therefore, can help the reader see himself as part of the natural world in which opposites not only coexist, but also in which the mysteries of life and death, for instance, are far beyond man's final control.

The same idea of powerful destruction in the midst of life is present in "The Hand that Signed the Paper". This is a poem that "could have been inspired by Hitler –in power in Germany since earlier that year," Paul Ferris points out, "but has a flavor of far-off tyrants, perhaps from the Bible" (1977: 81). In this case, man himself emerges as a source for much of the pain there is in life. The duality present here is between man's sensibility or insensibility towards mankind. The speaker, for instance, is a sensitive man who sees suffering and identifies himself with the suffering masses. His care contrasts with the careless behavior of some politicians towards their subjects.

As in the previous poem, the force taking life away is represented by a hand. To it the poet attaches the role of a performer; its force can not only create life but it can also destroy it. The consequences of the activity of the hand are present in every line. A city has been attacked because five fingers, a hand, signed a treaty, and thus, a country became half its size,

The hand that signed the paper felled a city;
 Five sovereign fingers taxed the breath,
 Doubled the globe of dead and halved a country;
 These five kings did a king to death.
 (Thomas 1971: 71)

That hand is unaware of the people affected by its doings. Still, that hand is “mighty” (stanza 2); the effects of its movement reach out many others even taxing their breath.

It is interesting to see how the sovereign is pictured. The reader never gets to see him completely. All the reader can see is the mighty hand at work: “The mighty hand leads to a sloping shoulder./ The finger joints are cramped with chalk” (stanza 2). But as such, this image is important; it lifts the poem to a universal level. No matter who this man is, that hand and those fingers could be those of any man from any country or time ruling mercilessly the life of those to whom he owes respect and justice. Therefore, one needs not see any specific face or body; one can make them up by looking at the consequences of the actions of that hand. Whoever that ruler is, his heart must be asleep. Ironically, that hand is “great,” for, as the poet says, it “Holds dominion over/ Man by a scribbled name,”

The hand that signed the treaty bred a fever,
 And famine grew, and locusts came;
 Great is the hand that holds dominion over
 Man by a scribbled name.
 (Thomas 1971: 71)

Only pain is sadly pictured in those words due to the doings of a heartless and mindless being.

The indifference of a tyrannical ruler towards human experience, his lack of feelings and pity toward mankind, are evoked again in stanza 4 when he starts to count the dead as if they were objects. The ruler’s indifference for those who have undergone suffering is distressing: “The five kings count the dead but to do not soften/ The crusted wound nor stroke the brow” (ll. 13, 14). The sentence, “A hand rules pity as a hand rules heaven” (l. 15), is significant at this point. The hand can speak of man’s thoughts and feelings and, therefore, its consequences can either provide happiness or pain depending on the heart and mind to whom it belongs. And the hands of many politicians, in the context of the poem, can be the hands of merciless, thoughtless people who bring much pain and destruction upon life.

But Dylan Thomas also shows great faith in man, in his capacity to love, to get outside of himself and to identify with nature and with mankind. Man and his outer world are not isolated entities; they are interrelated for good or bad. “When All My Five and Country Senses See” illustrates the poet’s strong faith in love as an endless force. Based on line 5, “Love in the frost is pared and wintered by,” William T. Moynihan, for example, states that, “the use of the homey reference to canning and preserving of the fall harvest provides a poignant image of the indestructibility of love” (1966: 93).

The poem opens with images of fertility highly appropriate for its theme, love: “green thumbs”, “half moon’s vegetable eye”, “husk of young stars and handful zodiac”. But we are removed from that setting; the fingers will stop that activity which is leading to

growth. Instead, they will mark how love is carried away from that fertile surrounding to be "pared and wintered by". That is, from a scene of vegetable growth, love will be move to an contrasting context –that of a "discordant beach,"

When all my five and country senses see,
 The fingers will forget green thumbs and mark
 How, through the halfmoon's vegetable eye,
 Husk of young stars and handful zodiac,
 Love in the frost is pared and wintered by,
 The whispering ears will watch love drummed away
 Down breeze and shell to a discordant beach.
 (Thomas 1971: 90)

However, the poet's heart is strong in faith. Love, he believes, is not confined to a given area or to a given time. It transcends them both, and it survives in the hearts of people of good will. He says, "My one and noble heart has witnesses/ In all love's countries, that will grope awake". He goes on with his optimism. "And when blind sleep drops on the spying senses/ The heart is sensual though five senses break", he affirms (1971: 90). The soul or heart of a man of good will will always be sensual, that is, aware of the physical life it has around it, of the pains, the sorrows and joys of mankind.

Thomas' world can be a vivid, highly rewarding reencounter with opposites, with life. And his creative experience was meant to be so for himself and the reader. As he said in 1934,

Poetry is the rhythmic, inevitable narrative, movement from an overclothed blindness to a naked vision... My poetry is, or should be, useful to me for one reason; it is the record of my individual struggle from darkness toward some measure of light... My poetry is, or should be, useful to others for its individual recordings of that same struggle with which they are necessarily acquainted (FitzGibbon 195: 142).

And it is with tremendous force that Thomas takes the reader out from his private world so that he may confront universals such as life and death, justice and injustice, apathy and love. And he must have been very positive about the latter for without love, the basis for identification with other beings, their thoughts and feelings, the reader could not react to and interact with the poet's lines as he expected.

The last quotation given above shows the intensity of the creative tensions present in Thomas's poetry. The poet confronts life, and from that confrontation some light arises which he tries to express in words. These words in turn create images of life in the reader's mind, images that can reach out the heart, too. And the effect of this interaction is the joined image of a universe where opposites not only exist but coexist. The paradox instead of being frustrating can be encouraging because in spite of the fact that love, for instance, may become drowsy in some men and in some lands, it will always stand out somewhere among men of good will, as the poem "When All My Five and Country Senses See" suggests. The reader, then, can trust that there will always be men after "some measure of light," as Thomas sentenced. Such was the role of our good poet, a man who after confronting the mysteries of life and got out of the darkness to share his enlightening experience wiith mankind: a sign of his love, for light is basic for life, it is a need upon man's path.

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