

This is, at bottom, the reaction of normal humanity to a world in which natural human feelings appear to be on the point of complete dissolution, and in which the state of 'unaccommodated man'—with which the whole Act has been basically concerned—is merely that of the fox and wolf, the savage beast of prey, condemned to destroy until he himself meets destruction. The reaction appears, on a short-term view, to fail. The servant who wounded Cornwall is himself stabbed in the back by Regan, referred to as a 'slave' whose corpse is to be thrown upon the 'dunghill' by his master's orders. Yet the fact remains that Gloucester's sufferings have at last provoked a disinterested human gesture of pity, and that Cornwall himself has been mortally wounded. Although the very justice of the order of nature seems to be called in doubt by the horrors just witnessed, it is no accident that the last word of the scene and of this stage in the tragedy, entrusted to a humble servant moved once more by the spectacle of Gloucester's suffering, is 'heaven help him!' The very simplicity of the phrase, set against the intolerable savagery we have just witnessed, serves as a prologue to the developments to follow.

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[*To be concluded.*]

COMMENTS AND REVIEWS

DYLAN THOMAS

COLLECTED POEMS, 1934-1952, by Dylan Thomas (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd., 12/6).

If Dylan Thomas has for some years now been the object of something of a cult, he has at length, to judge from the enthusiastic reception accorded to his last published volume, *Deaths and Entrances*, graduated to the status of a major, indeed a 'great' poet. But although it is now fairly usual for critics to speak of him in the same breath as Eliot, Auden, and Spender,—all four being, one gathers, equally 'great' poets—the kind of distinction commonly made between him and those writers is revealing and important. They, broadly speaking, are designated 'Classical', while Mr. Thomas, full of divine imperfection, is the ardent 'Romantic' rebel. A persistent note in the encomiums with which Mr. Thomas has been larded has been an insistence on what is generally described as his youthful 'spontaneity' and freshness of response to experience, unspoilt by too much of the 'intelligence' that has perhaps, it is tactfully suggested, made our modern poetical Renaissance rather

one-sided; all this going miraculously, it would seem, with a sophisticated mastery of involved verse-forms. The resultant picture is something very like the old familiar one of the Genius, in the total complex of which, one might venture,—without any disrespectful feelings towards the country of the poet's origin—the idea of the Bard counts for not a little.

Both poet and publisher, it must be admitted, give the right kind of critic every encouragement in holding such a view. For good measure this new collected volume includes Augustus John's portrait of Mr. Thomas in what one takes to be a characteristic attitude of smouldering inspiration, and the poet's own prefatory note, with its gusty button-holing protestation of no-nonsense, is the very voice of incandescent Genius:

'I read somewhere of a shepherd who, when asked why he made, from within fairy rings, ritual observances to the moon to protect his flocks, replied: "I'd be a damn' fool if I didn't!" These poems, with all their crudities, doubts and confusions, are written for the love of man and in praise of God, and I'd be a damn' fool if they weren't'.

Having thus disarmed criticism by implying that you are a rather inferior creature if you do not share his manly big-heartedness, the poet plunges into a breathless prologue in verse, 'intended as an address to my readers, the strangers':

This day winding down now
At God speeded summer's end
In the torrent salmon sun,
In my seashaken house
On a breakneck of rocks
Tangled with chirrup and fruit

Three words, 'torrent', 'breakneck', and 'tangled', may be detached and isolated as indicating the quality of the volume as a whole. Mr. Thomas is characteristically borne on a kind of Shelleyan 'aery surge', through a dazzling flood of image and sensation. To note this, of course, is not necessarily to make a serious charge; such idiosyncrasies may be canalized to serve a positive end, limited though the substance of poetic interest is likely to be. And it would, I think, be hard to deny that Mr. Thomas does in some measure possess a capacity for simple sensuous evocation which, without insistence on the evident dissimilarities, may be said faintly to resemble the lesser Hopkins of the 'nature' poetry. The opening of 'A Winter's Tale', quieter and more lucid than the staple of the verse in this collection, is a fair example of this manner at its best:

It is a winter's tale
That the snow blind twilight ferries over the lakes
And floating fields from the farm in the cup of the vales,
Gliding windless through the hand folded flakes,
The pale breath of cattle at the stealthy sail,

And the stars falling cold,
 And the smell of hay in the snow, and the far owl
 Warning among the folds, and the frozen hold
 Flocked with the sheep white smoke of the farm house cowl
 In the river wended vales where the tale was told.

Several criticisms promptly occur to one: the rhythmic flaccidity, the somewhat spineless and irritating repetition of 'and' with the consequent blurring of one image into another, the rather extraneous effect of 'hand folded'. But even when these points have been made, such writing, though not particularly distinguished, might justify one in attributing to the poet an agreeable minor talent—observe the clever concentration of suggestion in 'Flocked'—capable of possible useful exploitation within narrow and frankly accepted limits. The precarious success of these stanzas, however, is unfortunately not sustained. Hints of collapse implicit in the weaknesses just noted are only too surely realized, and before long the poem has modulated, or, more properly, 'lurched', into this kind of thing:

Look. And the dancers move
 On the departed, snow bushed green, wanton in moon light
 As a dust of pigeons. Exulting, the grave hooved
 Horses, centaur dead, turn and tread the drenched white
 Paddocks in the farms of birds. The dead oak walks for
 love.

Relation of the stanza to its context imparts no felicity, symbolic or otherwise, to the wilderness of images. Failing to cohere, to build up together into any kind of overall, unified pattern, they consequently fail to make any forceful or even challenging impact.

It is customary for Mr. Thomas to begin a poem in full *furor poeticus*, but on the rare occasions when, as in 'A Winter's Tale', he sounds a more steady and considered note at the outset, he soon wrecks the balance by letting his undisciplined and uncritical fancy run away with him. The first stanza of 'On a Wedding Anniversary', for example, despite the histrionic gesture of the opening line, has some subtlety of phrasing and movement:

The sky is torn across
 This ragged anniversary of two
 Who moved for three years in tune
 Down the long walks of their vows.

The concluding image of the third and final stanza, on the other hand, can only be described, at the most charitable, as hastily conceived and imperfectly grasped, though 'plain silly' might strike one as the more vividly suggestive term:

Too late in the wrong rain
 They come together whom their love parted:
 The windows pour into their heart
 And the doors burn in their brain.

Mr. Thomas's special mannerism, in fact, is just this habit of clutching at the apparently striking image that comes to hand, without a working-out of its implications or a proper consideration of its appropriateness. Violence is substituted for imaginative precision, as though in the hope that the force of the explosion may stun the reader's critical intelligence.

The Thomas enthusiast, of course, will affirm that this is the true fire, the apocalyptic visionary gift of the great poet, and will claim that failure to be impressed is the result of a one-sided estimate of the virtues of controlling critical vigilance in poetry. On the other hand, he will certainly defend Mr. Thomas against any suspicion of being a mere poet of intoxication, and will triumphantly point to his 'mastery' of complicated stanza-forms as evidence for the contrary. Nothing, indeed, is more odd about the cult of Mr. Thomas than the way in which his admirers alternately praise him now as the spontaneous, 'imperfect' genius, now as the wizard of technique. Such claims have been made for his architectonic skill that it is necessary to devote some special attention to this aspect of his work. If, as has been suggested, the opening of 'A Winter's Tale' faintly recalls the minor Hopkins, there are passages later in the poem that directly challenge comparison with the Hopkins of more distinguished achievement:

Bird, he was brought low,
Burning in the bride bed of love, in the whirl-
Pool at the wanting centre,

By no amount of effort to penetrate the poet's intentions can I arrive at a satisfactory explanation of the splitting of the word 'whirlpool'. The conclusion seems to be that Mr. Thomas either has not understood the nature of such an effect as the split 'ling/ering', for instance, in Hopkins' 'No worst, there is none', or else sees in the drawn-out 'whirl/Pool' some esoteric felicity inaccessible to the uninitiated reader. The effect of the division would appear to be merely visual, doing nothing to control the tone and movement when one is reading aloud. A similar lack of connection between the disposition of the words in the stanza and the actual pauses and stresses one is obliged to make in order to read the poem intelligibly aloud, turns 'Poem in October', which might perhaps have been quite a pleasant minor success—the tone is not too hectic, and the 'apocalyptic' note is not overworked—into a depressing 'literary' exercise:

A springful of larks in a rolling
Cloud and the roadside bushes brimming with whistling
Blackbirds and the sun of October
Summery
On the hill's shoulder,
Here were fond climates and sweet singers suddenly
Come in the morning where I wandered and listened
To the rain wringing
Wind blow cold
In the wood faraway under me.

That, to be sure, is not especially striking or original, but it has a certain lucid charm refreshing by comparison with this poet's normal heady wine. It is the more to be regretted, then, that Mr. Thomas did not permit his words to seek out and mould their own verse-structure, instead of stringing them brutally—for that, whatever the facts of composition, is the effect produced—across a pre-determined system of girders and scaffolding. An examination of 'Vision and Prayer' confirms one's suspicions that Mr. Thomas's preoccupation with 'form' is a concern with decoration rather than with poetry. The opening section, presumably 'Vision', is written in stanzas which billow out mathematically from a single word in the first line to a central line of six or seven words and then narrow down once more to the single isolated word, while 'Prayer' reverses the process. That, no doubt, looks very pretty, and perhaps one should be grateful to Mr. Thomas for making it clear by pictorial means, for one might well feel a trifle doubtful from a perusal of the words alone, which part of the poem is 'Vision' and which part 'Prayer'. But one is surely justified in asking for some precise guidance as to the writer's intentions. Does he, in fact, wish his poem to be read or simply to be looked at? If he claims the precedent of 'Easter Wings', one can only beg him to open his Herbert and think again. 'Easter Wings' is not one of Herbert's best poems, but the verse-structure is something more than a way of arranging words to make a picturesque symbolic design on paper.

The feeling informing 'Vision and Prayer', a kind of self-indulgent religiosity as grotesque as the verse-form, is characteristic of much of the later work in this volume. The poet's attitude to life, supposedly, has 'deepened'; or, in other words, a mess of quasi-Christian imagery has been thrown in to swell the broth. This religiosity may take the form of pompous unction, as in 'The Conversation of Prayer', of pseudo-liturgical verbal juggling, as in 'Ceremony after a Fire Raid', or, at its most offensive, of a downright disgusting self-righteousness:

I shall not murder
The mankind of her going with a grave truth
Nor blaspheme down the stations of the breath
With any further
Elegy of innocence and youth.

The lines are taken from a poem entitled 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London'. Mr. Thomas was doubtless affected by the incident, and intended his poem to be a fitting and dignified expression of his reactions to it. The trouble is that the pronoun 'I', as in the body of his work, is much too conspicuous. But whereas one can tolerate this, however irritating it may be, when the basis of the poem is mere personal rhapsody, it becomes offensive in the extreme when the writer starts to pontificate on matters of common human feeling and suffering.

Mr. Thomas's art has not improved with the years. The early poems in the volume, though one could hardly call any one of them

successful, have not that kind of gross pretentiousness. And although the imagery is no less tangled than that of the later work, it is not quite the same haphazard welter; Mr. Thomas is being less of a genius and more of a poet. If one finds the following lines strained and ineffective, one feels nonetheless that Mr. Thomas had some reasonably clear idea of what he was trying to do, even though the experiment did not come off:

Where once the waters of your face
 Spun to my screws, your dry ghost blows,
 The dead turns up its eye;
 Where once the mermen through the ice
 Pushed up their hair, the dry wind steers
 Through salt and root and roe.

These earlier poems make at least a pretence of coherence, even though the effect is often really the result of a trick. 'A process in the weather of the heart' and 'The force that through the green fuse drives the flower', to take two instances, have the kind of spurious-logical structure of which Shelley's 'Music, when soft voices die' is the classic example.

Superior as they are, generally speaking, to the later productions, the early poems could hardly have given one much hope for the future. Only the strictest self-criticism and self-discipline could have led Mr. Thomas to put his exuberant verbal energies to effective poetic use. As it is, his progress has been swift, confident, and disastrous, though 'disastrous' may seem the wrong word to use in speaking of the career of a poet who, spurred on by general acclamation, may be expected to continue to exhibit his mastery of intricate verse-forms for years to come. A cult, in these days, becomes all too easily an institution. But the attitudes implicit in the widespread acceptance of Mr. Thomas as a major poet, in the kind of praise with which he has been garlanded, may well give one cause for alarm, may well strike one as potentially disastrous for the future of English poetry.

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FRENCH POETRY

THE POETRY OF FRANCE, an anthology, with Introduction and Notes by Alan M. Boase (Methuen; pp. XCVII, 247—16/6).

ANTHOLOGY OF MODERN FRENCH POETRY, FROM BAUDELAIRE TO THE PRESENT DAY, by C. A. Hackett (Basil Blackwell; pp. XXXIX, 305—17/6).

CONTEMPORARY FRENCH POETRY, by Joseph Chiari, with a Foreword by T. S. Eliot (Manchester University Press; pp. XVI, 180—12/6).

Compiling an anthology of poetry, and particularly of modern poetry, must be a pleasurable occupation, though surely a distressing one. What reader has ever been content with anthologies