Obscurity and the Mythic Quest for Shape:
A Discussion and Explication of
Dylan Thomas' *Alarwise by Owl-light*

by

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ABSTRACT

Dylan Thomas' obscure sonnet sequence, *Altarwise by Owl-light*, has "inspired more comment and caused more disagreement than anything else by Thomas."¹ Reading the sequence is like experiencing a confused nightmare or dream vision, for the poem is curiously primitive and myth-like. Through the confusion of rioting images, however, Thomas' desire for structure and meaning emerges. Thomas repeatedly employs the term "shape" in the sonnets in a context of questioning, of trying to determine what the correct shape is. In addition, the poem is filled with suggestions of processes by which man tries to order experience and to determine the true shape and, thus, the true meaning of life. Thomas' examples range from literature (journalism, romantic novels and poetry) to the visual arts (painting, photography and movies) and, finally, to mythic systems (astrology, Christianity and the fertility cults).

Although critics have maintained almost complete unanimity in agreeing with Marshall Stearns that the eighth sonnet is "the climax in a series of loosely connected sonnets,"² the eighth sonnet is in itself anticlimactic since it follows the discovery of the shape of the universe in Sonnet VII, originally the final poem of the sequence. The first seven sonnets portray the poet's quest for structure or meaning in the universe, culminating in the discovery in Sonnet VII that the shape of the universe is a circle representing the cycle of process. The final three sonnets
further elucidate the theme, exploring the consequences of this truth and discovering what comfort there is for mankind. And, in so doing, the sonnets reinterpret the story of Christ as a mythic representation of the suffering of mankind and man's redeeming capacity for love.

Both the theme and the technique of the sonnets are characteristic of Thomas' work. Continually Thomas writes mythic philosophical poems which portray a quest for shape, while both his technique and his theory reveal remarkable similarities to mythic thought, similarities which help to explain some of the obscurities of his verse. Moreover, as the sonnets epitomize the technical obscurity and ambiguity of Thomas' early poetry, they also further suggest the continuing ambiguity and obscurity characteristic of the poetic presentation of Thomas' vision of the shape and meaning of reality at every period of his life.
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Chapter One

In a letter to Bert Trick from Donegal, Ireland in 1935 Dylan Thomas wrote, "words are coming nicely," and indeed they must have been, for in the following year and one half Thomas completed six poems including his famous sonnet sequence, *Altarwise by Owl-light*. Although the writing of the sonnet sequence may have been relatively easy for Thomas since words and images were coming "nicely," critics have not found the task of interpreting the long, obscure poem to be at all simple. In fact the sonnet sequence, generally regarded as Thomas' most obscure work, has "inspired more comment and caused more disagreement than anything else by Thomas." Critical reaction to the poem has been extreme, the first critics reacting according to their opinion of Thomas as a man. As time has progressed, however, critical opinion has begun to center around two poles. Since the sonnets are characteristic of Thomas' early very obscure, very compact technique, reaction to the sonnets has been determined by each critic's opinion of Thomas' early style, and, therefore, controversy has centered around the question of Thomas' famed obscurity.

As might be expected, those who loved Thomas praised the sonnets, proclaiming their overwhelming approval of both the poet and his poetry. A group of young English writers calling themselves the Apocalyptics patterned their verse after Thomas', linking his name with other "Apocalyptic greats," such as James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Vincent van Gogh,
Pablo Picasso, and Jacob Epstein. Dame Edith Sitwell wrote in 1936, "I know of no young poet of our time whose poetic gifts are on such great lines," and later reviewed the Altar-wise sonnets praising them profusely as "nothing short of magnificent." Emphasizing Thomas' technical proficiency, Robert Lowell observed, "As a formal metrician, Wallace Stevens is the only living poet who can hold a candle to him," and Leslie Fiedler added, "the talent that can select words distinguished enough to bear the burden of the rime, is unrivalled, I think, since Arnaud Daniel." Perhaps most significantly, Elder Olson felt compelled to conclude his highly complimentary discussion of the sonnets with an apology for a possible lack of critical objectivity: "The respect which I feel for his poetry has perhaps sometimes led me into eulogy rather than criticism; I can only say that, in my view, to state the facts about his best poems is to eulogize."

Equally profuse and extreme in their comments, however, Thomas' detractors have attacked the sonnets for a variety of reasons. Remarks range from pure name calling to more constructive criticism. Geoffrey Grigson, perhaps the most famed censurer of Thomas' poetry, called Thomas' poetry nothing more than a "meaningless hot sprawl of mud," while George Steiner went so far as to claim Thomas was a poetic impostor. Only slightly more valuable has been criticism that rather than examining the sonnets for their technique and meaning has simply presented arguments about Thomas'
obscurity. For example, in an article published in the Kenyon Review in 1940, Julian Symons categorically asserted that there are two kinds of obscurity in poetry: (1) obscurity of meaning necessitated by a difficult or obscure subject, and (2) obscurity of technique used to cloak a simple meaning, or no meaning, in order to make a poem seem profound.

Then without any indication of a serious examination of the poem, Symons pronounced Thomas' sonnets to be an example of the latter category. Other critics have been satisfied to state that while the sonnets are not fraudulent attempts at the appearance of profundity, they do fail since Thomas' extreme obscurity impedes communication. Perhaps the most anti-Thomas of all critics, David Holbrook, criticized the sonnets on the grounds that Thomas wrote childish adolescent poetry. Indeed, his attack would be devastating if it did not so transparently reveal Holbrook's bias as a critic and his total misunderstanding of the sonnets.

The nature of the personal mythology becomes more apparent in the famous Altarwise by Owl-light, a series of sonnets. They contain violent imagery of sexual injury, mixed with 'apocalyptic vision' and Biblical imagery, references to Christ's birth mixed with the poet's birth, and Eve's copulation with the serpent mixed with the child-poet's loss of innocence. There is an occasional disgusting image of recoil from life...and the poems become pretentious nonsense, lacking in true rhythm and metaphorically inert. If there is anything to be found it is the posturing as of a child convinced of his importance-exhibiting his genital organ ('my long gentleman') and asserting that he is as important as Christ; the only reaction in an adult to an adult behaving in such ways, is boredom at the insistence, however much we may feel pity for the need of a soul to offer such a babble of infantile claims--'old cock from nowheres...' instead of the true voice of poetry.11
Most excessively harsh critics of Thomas' sonnets tend, like Grigson, Symons and Holbrook, to put a consideration of the sonnets as poems second to proving their own theories about what poetry should be. However, even Thomas seems sensitive to the charge that the sonnets are obscure and childish. When asked about the poems by a student at the University of Utah in 1952, Thomas answered with more than his customary degree of self-depreciation.

Student: Is it necessary for a poem to have an outcome? Robert Frost says that a poem should be resolved. It should not be too obscure to be understood. I have difficulty understanding you, especially your early sonnets.

Thomas: Then you should read Robert Frost.... But you are right; to the poet, at least, there is always an outcome. Those sonnets are only the writings of a boyish boy in love with shapes and shadows on his pillow....

Thomas' humorous reply, "Then you should read Robert Frost," could just as well be leveled at his hostile critics, for Thomas' obscurity is necessary to the meaning and the force of *Alarwise by Owl-light* and is the product, in Thomas' words, of "rigorous compression." It is not that the poet is expressing a simple meaning in a difficult manner, but that he is compressing multiple meanings into the most concise form possible. In fact, the technique of conscious ambiguity used in the sonnets successfully communicates the experience of a man attempting to derive meaning by discovering a structure behind the fluctuating sensations impinging upon his senses—sensations which provide all man knows of
the world beyond him. As man thinks he glimpses structure and meaning, the images he receives change, shift and escape him. Similarly, *Altarwise by Owl-light* is an adolescent poem only if one considers a desire to find meaning in the universe, especially the desire to find spiritual meaning without losing sight of physical reality to be primarily the concern of the young.

Rather than attacking Thomas for his childishness or for his obscurity, therefore, most critics who have written extensively about Thomas' early poetry have applauded the depth and texture which have resulted from Thomas' concision and from the multiple meanings of his "warring images." Moreover, most critics who have examined the sonnets agree that the sonnets do have a definite meaning which can be understood with careful study of the poem and that the sonnets are replete with both Biblical and sexual imagery. From this point on, however, there is little unanimity concerning the meaning of the sonnets although theories usually fall into two groups depending upon the relative emphasis placed on either the Biblical or the sexual imagery.

The first examinations of the sonnets were similar for the most part, emphasizing the sexual imagery. The Biblical imagery was primarily seen as supplementary, employed by Thomas to convey a sexual theme. Francis Scarfe, in his essay on Thomas in *Auden and After*, was one of the first critics to attempt to interpret the sonnets and was the first critic to establish the now accepted thesis that the ten sonnets
"cannot be considered separately, as together they form a unit." Having examined the sexual themes of 18 Poems, Scarfe examined 25 Poems and Altarwise by Owl-light, concisely summarizing his interpretation of the sonnets: "After presenting in his poems a brilliant sexual interpretation of life, Dylan Thomas has here presented a sexual interpretation of death. The secret of death, and its horror, is that it is sexless." Similarly, in an article entitled "Unsex the Skeleton: Notes on the Poetry of Dylan Thomas," Marshall Stearns emphasized the sexual imagery in the sonnets but interpreted it somewhat differently, basing his explanation almost exclusively on the eighth sonnet which he believed to be the "climax in a series of ten loosely connected sonnets."

The lines may best be explained... as the poet's attempt to describe the crucifixion as interpreted by Mary, the mother of God, the mother of Jesus, and the source of all creation. The key to the poem is the fundamental contrast between the earthly and the heavenly Mary.... At the most crucial moment of all time, when man becomes god and mortality immortality, she plays the one essential role and through her, sex rises to asexual and eternal glory.

Finally, in his full-length study of Thomas' poetry, Derek Stanford moved in the direction of a more religious, yet still predominantly sexual, explanation of the poem although his comments were based almost entirely on Scarfe's prior analysis of the poem.

It is the 'pantheistic' conception of the dispersal of man's being at death among the other forces of nature which are really one with his own [and therefore nature, being one with man, shares his sexual nature]... But it is the powerful entry of Christian currents of thought that create new and warring
elements in these poems. This tendency reaches full expression in the 'sonnets' of *Altarwise by Owl-light*, where the poet strives to incorporate his view of sex in a religious context.

Increasingly, critics have emphasized the Biblical imagery, suggesting that the primary theme of the sonnets is religious, although the meaning is presented through sexual imagery. Each commentator, however, defines "religious" somewhat differently. Ralph Maud, one of the first critics to treat the poem as a religious sonnet sequence, emphasized the primacy of the crucifixion in Sonnet VIII. Thus, the subject of the poem is Christ's death either as event or metaphor, and Christ's sacrifice is interpreted as suggestive of a possible redemption. Unfortunately, Maud did not discuss the sonnets in detail (although he has explicated Sonnet I in the *Explicator*), and, therefore, his exact interpretation is not completely clear.

Quoting Maud's general comments, Jacob Korg elaborated on his thesis. As there is almost overwhelming concensus among critics that one recurrent theme in Thomas' poetry is process or time, it seems rational to look for a similar theme in the sonnets. Therefore, Korg combined the religious approach to the sonnets with an approach more in line with the themes of Thomas' other early poetry, suggesting that the theme of the poem could well be process or cycle.

In spite of its local obscurities, the sequence does have a definable theme, a surprisingly familiar one: it is the Atonement, the doctrine that Christ's suffering redeemed mankind. If much of the poem seems tangential or irrelevant to this theme, that is because Thomas, as we have had
occasion to note, thought of the Christian legend only as a leading instance of the natural cycle. The Christian iconography that dominates the poem dramatizes the dialectic of nature and its spiritual implications, but it is not their definitive embodiment.20

Similarly, William T. Moynihan, in the Craft and Art of Dylan Thomas, interpreted the sonnets as religious but not necessarily Christian, writing that the sonnets present a "complete depiction of the fallen world, the world of exodus or wilderness, the world of the lost wanderer, the outcast voyager." Viewing the framework of the sonnets as patterned around the birth, growth, and death of the voyager, Moynihan suggested that the sonnets reveal the young boy's growing awareness of the reality of death, ending with an ambiguous tenth sonnet in which the symbolic voyager refuses to commit himself to Christianity.

Many literary experts who interpret Altarwise by Owl-light as a religious work define "religion" in a more traditional manner. At least two important critics are convinced that the sonnet sequence is a Christian poem. Characteristic of this position is G. S. Fraser's statement in Vision and Rhetoric: "The sonnets...are important because they announce the current of orthodox Christian feeling—feeling rather than thought—which was henceforth increasingly to dominate Thomas's work in poetry."22 And, H. H. Kleinman has written a book-length explication of the sonnets (discussed in detail later in this chapter) attempting to demonstrate that Altarwise by Owl-light is a Christian meditation.

As helpful and illuminating as the analyses of the
critics discussed thus far might be, their statements tease rather than convince because none (except Kleinman) treats the sonnets in detail. Three critics, however, have written lengthy explications of the sonnets, and although they differ almost entirely in interpretation, they agree that the sonnets are very successful as poetry and that the worth of the sonnets is directly related to the depth and texture resulting from Thomas' ambiguity. Each, moreover, has successfully countered the charge that Thomas was confused and that the poems mean little or nothing, by rigorously analyzing the poems.

The first such critique occurs in The Poetry of Dylan Thomas (1954) by Elder Olson. Emphasizing the complexity of Thomas' work, Olson finds "six distinguishable levels, which the poet intricately interrelates":

(1) a level based on the analogy of human life to the span of a year, which permits the use of phenomena of the seasons to represent events of human life, and vice versa;

(2) a level based on an analogy between the sun and man, permitting the attributes of each to stand for those of the other;

(3) a level of Thomas' 'private' symbolism;

(4) a level based on ancient myth, principally Greek, representing the fortunes of the sun in terms of the adventures of the sun-hero Hercules;

(5) a level based on relations of the constellation Hercules to other constellations and astronomical phenomena; and

(6) a level derived from the Christian interpretation of levels 4 and 5.

Of the six levels, Olson chooses the last three for his
exegesis of the sonnets, explaining that the sequence is organized around two journeys across the sky. Sonnets I through III and Sonnet V recount the journey of the constellation Hercules (associated with the pagan world and a fear of death), while Sonnets VII through X recount the movements of Cygnus, the Northern Cross (suggesting the possibility of redemption).

Olson's explication of the poem intelligently and ingeniously shows an exact parallel in the heavens for almost every image in the poem. The "dog" in Sonnet I is "Canis Major, the Greater Dog"; "two-gunned Gabriel" in Sonnet V is "Perseus, a circumpolar constellation in the latitude of the British Isles"; and the "blown word" of Sonnet X is "Cygnus." From this maze of complicated astrological parallels, Olson succeeds in distilling a coherent summary of the meaning of the poem. The poet-Hercules figure in Sonnet I "is a man who, aware of his sinfulness and mortality, faces the prospect of death...seeing the change of seasons reflected in the stars themselves, he feels that all nature is mortal; the very heavens symbolize the transit of all things to death.... The true faith, bitter as it is, is in death; nothing else is real." Sonnets II through VI elaborate on this theme until in Sonnet VII "the hero of the poem spurns time; nothing is to be gained from time; he pins his faith to the Cross, which he sees in the heavens, sees it as a symbol of God and Christ, as the Tree of Life." In Sonnet VIII, however, "the Cross sets....There is no immortality, no
redemption, only sacrifice; and he accepts the sacrifice, Christlike." Spurning in Sonnet IX the immortality provided by his art, in the final sonnet the poet finds hope as the Cross reappears: "The heavens, even in their change and motion, spell out the message of God. Let time have its way, then, let the seasons follow on each other, until the Day that will never end, when all will be restored."25

Elder Olson's exegesis of the poem is not entirely convincing. As he readily admits, "the time scheme of the poem is not without its problems." Specifically, Olson is unable to incorporate Sonnet IV into his astrological fable, suggesting that the sonnet interrupts the Hercules narrative to express the poet's musings. Moreover, many of the zodiacal parallels do little else than demonstrate that Thomas had something concrete in mind in writing the poem; they contribute little to rendering the poem intelligible. Furthermore, as intelligent and clever as is Olson's interpretation, it depends upon the reader's possessing such esoteric knowledge that Olson finds himself recommending that every reader of Thomas should obtain "a seasonal star-map" or "one of the clever and inexpensive star-wheels now available."26

It is unlikely that Thomas, who in reply to Edith Sitwell's interpretation of his poem pleaded for a literal interpretation, would approve of an explanation stressing such specialized knowledge. Moreover, since he felt called upon to correct Edith Sitwell's misinterpretation of his lines, had there been an essential "key" to his poem, he most certainly
would have mentioned it, and if there were such a key and Thomas did not mention it, he must truly be guilty of willful obscurity. Therefore, as convincing as is Olson's treatment of the sonnets, one must assume that the involved esoteric parallels he describes are not essential to the primary meaning of the poem. This, of course, does not eliminate the possibility that Thomas did intend the parallels but that they operate on a secondary level and merely reinforce the central experience of the poem. Since the sonnets are obviously very much concerned with cycle, of the seasons, the stars and the sun, the astrological and mythological imagery found by Olson is certainly in keeping with the mood and subject of the poem, and, therefore, Olson's explication contributes to the reader's awareness of the depth of meaning to be found in Thomas' work.

Writing some eight years after Olson published his study of *Altarwise by Owl-light*, William York Tindall in *A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas* credits Olson comments only to disagree almost totally in his final interpretation of the sonnets: "Although cheerfully allowing the presence of Jesus, Hercules, the stars, the zodiac, and a generally neglected voyage, I think them analogies, not to be confused with theme." Summarizing his own explication of the sonnets, Tindall writes, "Read in the contest of his other poems and his prose, these sonnets seem another portrait of the artist as a young dog—of 'a dog among the fairies.' Beginning with his begetting, the story proceeds through childhood,
and ends with the writing and publication of poems." In Sonnet I Thomas is born; in Sonnet II he is a suckling; in Sonnet III he, a child of one or two, is growing; in Sonnet IV the "young Thomas troubles mother with embarrassing questions about sex and obstetrics"; and in Sonnet V, which "celebrates [Thomas'] weaning," the young boy is playing cowboy, going to Sunday school and developing an antipathy toward women. Sonnet VI introduces a slightly different theme as Thomas begins to write poetry. The sirens in Sonnet VII are the poet's "Muses" which have become Thomas' God, while in Sonnet VIII Thomas the poet suffers symbolic crucifixion and Thomas the young man accepts "the parents who shaped and advised him." In Sonnet IX the poet is concerned with immortality through poetry and specifically the publishing of his work, the "mask of scholars" referring to the critics and the "pyramidal resting place" at the end of the octave suggesting a "bed," or "that part of a printing press on which the printer's form, filled with type is laid." Finally, in Sonnet X, "devoted to his ceremony [the writing of poetry], the poet is wise to it. His star-crossed self, nailed to this great, composite tree finds hope of mercy there and hope of blossoming."

Tindall's predominantly freudian, autobiographical interpretation of the poem is not always sufficiently clear. While analyzing the rich apparatus of metaphor and allusion and stressing the freudian implications of each elongated object, Tindall sometimes fails to derive a clear, coherent
meaning from each sonnet. Furthermore, his general interpretation of the poem is dependent upon a rather arbitrary identification between all feminine creatures in the poem and a corresponding identification between all male creatures. "Mary," "the furies," "the sirens," and the "black medusa" are all synonymous with the mother of Christ and the mother of Thomas. Similarly, the "gentleman," the "devil," the "old cock," "Adam," and even "Jonah's Moby" are simultaneously Thomas, his father, Christ and God. Therefore, much of the long poem is concerned with a freudian contest between Thomas' parents for his love, while Thomas strives to accept his parents and by analogy to accept sexuality.

Although Tindall's analysis is frequently illuminating, his specific explanations often seem totally arbitrary. For example, with no explanation for any connection between either Jonah or Moby and the father principle, Tindall announces that "Jonah's Moby" in Sonnet V is Thomas' father. In Sonnet VI Tindall sees Thomas' parents contending with each other and encouraging Thomas to write. To demonstrate this, he adds that the "father provides the candle and lamp" and the "mother provides the page" with no other explanation or proof of his assertion than writing, "'Pluck...my sea eye,' says mother to her cocky son" and "'Lop...my fork tongue,' says father, the satanic patron of forked language." Nevertheless, Tindall's discussion of the Altarwise sonnets does provide the most complete non-religious, non-mythic interpretation of the sonnets thus far. Furthermore, his analysis of the
poem serves to bring to light specific personal connotations of many of the images Thomas employs and their relation to Thomas' life and psychology. 29

The most complete and lengthy exegesis of the Altarwise sonnets published to date is H. H. Kleinman's The Religious Sonnets of Dylan Thomas 30 in which Kleinman explicates the sonnets in minute detail, arguing that the sonnets "are a deeply moving statement of religious perplexity concluding in spiritual certainty." "The pattern of the poem" Kleinman continues, "is similar to the sequence of medieval pageant plays, each sonnet a tableau, moving from the Incarnation through the Crucifixion to an apocalyptic prophecy." Reflecting the spirit of seventeenth-century devotional literature in mood and imagery, each sonnet presents a religious (usually Biblical) scene. "The first sonnet gives us the Nativity, the second describes the child growing, the third goes back to the Incarnation as divine intention, the fourth gives us the Nativity again." The fifth further examines the Annunciation and Nativity, the sixth vividly describes creation, and the seventh provides a beautiful calm before the climactic eighth sonnet. In Sonnet VIII Christ's death is presented as redemptive, and in Sonnet IX Egyptian parallels to Christ's resurrection are described to universalize Christ's message. Finally, the concluding "tenth sonnet takes us beyond the narrative content of the first nine sonnets in the same way that the books of Acts of the Apostles and Revelation take us beyond the narrative theme of the synoptic Gospels."
Briefly summarizing his interpretation, Kleinman writes:

There is a revelation in the sonnets of a fearful struggle of the poet with his God. Concentric to the theme of struggle is the theme of sacrifice; the agonizing story of Abraham and Isaac is implicit in the sonnets. Mount Moriah and Calvary loom large in this poem.

The first seven sonnets are earthbound, as if the Word were imprisoned in clay. It is in the eighth sonnet that Thomas's doubt wrestles with faith as he sees in the Crucifixion the triumph of eternity over pain. The ninth sonnet wavers between weariness and expectance. In the tenth sonnet Thomas's soul is brushed by an angel's wing, and in the last lines of the poem prophecy and credo ring plangent of the green garden and the everlasting mercy. The poem begins with a sonnet mocking the descent of the Word; it concludes in a spiraling ascent of faith.

Suggesting that "a poem should mean as well as be," Kleinman writes that the sonnets seem obscure because they are replete with echoes and allusions to a wide range of learned and literary works. Thus, Kleinman devotes a good part of his study to an analysis of possible sources and analogues for Thomas' language and imagery; including the Zohar; Hugh Latimer's "Sermons on the Card" preached in Cambridge in December, 1529; the sermons of Lancelot Andrewes; the works of Egyptologist E. A. W. Budge; and certain practical arts, such as gardening, fishing and bookbinding. Since Kleinman usually provides several possible meanings and applications for each image, this exhaustive survey of possible sources for Thomas' imagery is certainly helpful, but he is somewhat indiscriminate and expects from Thomas and from Thomas' reader a vast knowledge of little known information. Moreover, Kleinman fails to summarize in any complete
way, leaving his reader with a confusion of detail, while his concentration on finding an exact Biblical parallel for every image and event in the poem leads to rather strained explanations. For example, the interpretation of the crucial tenth sonnet depends upon a rather arbitrary association of the "rubarb man" with Paul (based on the evidence that Sir Philip Sidney once used the term "rhubarb" to mean Paul). Thus, Kleinman explains that the sonnet concerns Paul's triumph over the Venus Cult in Rome and, consequently, that the sonnet deals with the gift of the Holy Spirit and the entrance of the Gentiles into the fraternity of believers.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, Kleinman ignores rather crucial evidence external to the sonnets, for there is little if any, evidence that Thomas would have written an orthodox Christian poem as anything more than an exercise in the expression of comparative religious beliefs. As Pamela Hansford Johnson recalls, "He [Thomas] cared nothing for Christ in a theological sense, he said, but cared very much for Christ as a symbol."33 Whatever the limitations of Kleinman's analysis, however, his book is fundamental to any serious study of the sonnets since it does clarify many enigmatic images and allusions, even suggesting possible meanings not relevant to Kleinman's own thesis.34

Perhaps the most serious deficiency of the three major explications of Altarwise by Owl-light is the assumption on the part of each commentator that all modern poems can be explained in the same terms. For example, it is assumed that
the obscurities of the sonnets can be explained in the same way as those of *The Waste Land*. Assuming that a mature search for truth must be rational, explicators search for an exact definition of the meaning of each image. Tindall says "Jonah's Moby" means "father," Olson says the "medusa" is a constellation, and Kleinman says "the Rhubarb man" is Paul. However inevitable the tendency in explication may be to treat a prose paraphrase as a translation of the poem, it is still quite important to view the poem in the framework of the writer's poetic technique and his intentions in writing the poem. Rather than explaining the meaning of the sonnets as one would *The Waste Land* (by simply decoding the difficult allusions), it would seem better to analyze them in a manner more appropriate to *The Four Quartets*. For although Eliot's *Four Quartets* is perhaps a more mature and sophisticated work than Thomas' *Altarwise* sonnets, the poems are similar in an important way. Each attempts to portray a mystic religious philosophy and in doing so, each attempts to express the inexpressible. Inevitably, therefore, each poet uses language and imagery to express his own unique conception of reality, and many times the imagery and the sound patterns are used to evoke nonlogical, emotional reactions which cannot be translated into a rational prose parallel.

Well aware of the sort of poet he is, Dylan Thomas carefully explains that his style is mystic, disapproving of Wordsworth because he "hadn't a spark of mysticism." Thus, Thomas' approach is mystic, mythic, and symbolic.
(similar to the symbolic approach to meaning characteristic of primitive societies\textsuperscript{37}). As Jacob Korg observes, "His early unpublished poems show that...[he found themes for his poems] in the prelogical convictions about being and reality which came to him in the course of his attempts to solve the spiritual perplexities of his youth. These ideas are among the oldest and most elementary beliefs mankind has held, the irreducible truths that present themselves when the imagination pursues ultimate conclusions."\textsuperscript{38} Therefore, if Thomas' symbolic approach is primitive, it is also basic, and if the meaning of each image in his poems cannot be explained in strictly rational or logical terms, many of the emotions and concepts most fundamental to the beliefs of mankind are neither rational or logical.

In the light of these ideas, Thomas' remark (cited earlier) that the sonnets are "the writings of a boily boy in love with shapes and shadows on his pillow" illuminates the sonnets, for the entire sonnet sequence is characterized by shifting, almost dreamlike, images. Reading the sequence is like experiencing a confused nightmare or dream vision, for the poem is curiously primitive and myth-like; yet, through the confusion of rioting images, Thomas' love of and desire for "shape" emerges. Using the word "shape" itself eight separate times in the sequence, Thomas repeatedly employs the term in a context of questioning, of trying to determine what the correct shape is. For example Sonnet IV begins,
Moreover, he writes in Sonnet II of the shape of time ("shape in one history") and the shape of space ("shapeless country").

In addition to the numerous references to "shape," the poem is filled with suggestions of processes by which man tries to order experience and to determine the true shape and, thus, the true meaning of life. His examples of attempts to order experience range from literature (journalism, romantic novels, and poetry) to the visual arts (painting, photography, and movies) and, finally, to mythic systems (astrology, Christianity and the fertility cults). Even the very form of the poem reflects his subject. Each of the ten poems approximates the sonnet form—a form which necessitates an artificial à priori structuring of language by the poet. The poet's failure to achieve the strictly regular stanzaic pattern of the sonnet reflects the similar failure on his part to make all à priori systems fit the facts of the universe.

Moreover, most of the sonnets are inverted, the sestet coming before the octave, reflecting an inverted or confused order in the universe so that the form mirrors the meaning of the poem. Furthermore, the sonnets' obscurity conveys much of the meaning. In searching for meaning in the obscure poem, the reader is put in the position of the poet who in writing the poem is searching for meaning in a universe in which meaning is elusive. Perhaps it is this that explains why the poem communicates without fully being understood...
because the sonnets successfully communicate the feeling of confusion, of a deluge of data impinging on the senses.

To remark upon the technique Thomas has quite obviously employed is not to pass a value judgment. It may be argued that in writing an obscure poem in order to communicate the experience of an obscure universe the poet is guilty of the "fallacy of expressive, or imitative, form" which Ivor Winters asserts "is a vice wherever it occurs" since communication "is enfeebled." However, it may also be stated in Thomas' defense that his obscurity is not necessitated by any inability to write perfectly clear, coherent, simple poetry (as demonstrated in such poems as "Do not go gentle into that good night" and "The Hunchback in the Park"). Moreover, whether or not Thomas would consider obscurity to be necessitated by an obscure subject, he employs obscurity functionally in the sonnets. Rather than becoming a slave to some concept of imitative form, Thomas uses his technique as a psychological device to enhance the reader's experience of the poem (as should become apparent in the detailed examination of the sonnets in Chapter II). And, although in so doing Thomas limits his audience to those willing to read the sonnets on Thomas' own terms, the successful reader is rewarded by not only understanding but also experiencing Thomas' quest for shape.

It is this quest for shape or pattern among "shifting shadows" that entitles these sonnets to be called philosophical, if not religious, sonnets. They are philosophical sonnets
for they present the poet's quest for truth; yet, they are also religious sonnets since the poet seeks the truth about God or the ultimate principles of the universe in an attempt to discover man's relationship to God or these principles and to the rest of the universe. Moreover, Thomas' recurrent concern with the correct interpretation of Christianity and his final reinterpretation of the story of Christ in mythic terms reveal that Thomas' philosophical interest is clearly in the province of religious thought. Furthermore, Thomas' philosophic inquiry is conducted with the techniques of a mystic poet rather than with the strict logic characteristic of modern philosophy.

In this regard, a statement made by Dylan Thomas to Henry Treece about his poetic method is revealing.

A poem by myself needs a host of images, because its center is a host of images. I make one image—though 'make' is not the word: I let, perhaps, an image be 'made' emotionally in me and then apply to it what intellectual and critical forces I possess—let it breed another, let that image contradict the first, make, of the third image bred out of the other two together, a fourth contradictory image, and let them all, within my imposed formal limits, conflict. Each image holds within it the seed of its own destruction, and my dialectal method, as I understand it, is a constant building up and breaking down of the images that come out of the central seed, which is itself destructive and constructive at the same time.

What I want to try to explain—and it's necessarily vague to me—is that the life in any poem of mine cannot move concentrically round a central image; the life must come out of the centre; an image must be born and die in another; and any sequence of my images must be a sequence of creations, recreations, destructions, contradictions. I cannot, either—as Cameron does and as others do, and this primarily explains his and their writing round the
central image--make a poem out of a single motivating experience; I believe in the simple thread of action through a poem, but that is an intellectual thing aimed at lucidity through narrative. My object is, as you say, conventionally 'to get things straight.' Out of the inevitable conflict of images--inevitable, because of the creative, recreative, destructive and contradictory nature of the motivating centre, the womb of war--I try to make that momentary peace which is a poem.41

This passage reverberates with suggestivity, explaining much that is puzzling about the sonnets. First, Thomas is not a logical or rational poet. As he states, his poems do not move "around one idea, from one logical point to another." Rather, his vision is mythic, suggesting primitive rites and associations, truth being gleaned from complexes of images appearing to be almost chaotically presented. Second, the poet presents a world of chaos and warring images. Peace comes about only for short periods, and this unstable peace is created by the poet. Third, Thomas' poetic method is necessitated by his view of the world as a confusion of sense impressions, and by his desire for order so that he may "get things straight." Thus, in Altarwise by Owl-light the poet makes a voyage through the chaos of life and the riot of sensations that impinge upon the senses in order to achieve an order, to find the pattern behind seeming disorder. When he does in the end find the pattern, it is like the pattern of his poetry, "a sequence of creations, recreations, destruc-tions, and contradictions." It is the pattern of the cycle of process, life and death endlessly repeated and shared by man, God and universe--a pattern which is only re-deemed by human perceptivity and human suffering which alone
order the world and give the world meaning.

Each of the critics writing a lengthy explication of the sonnets demonstrates one aspect of cycle or process in the poem. Tindall stresses the organization of the poem around a single life; Olson emphasizes the cycle of the seasons and the cyclical progress of the movements of the stars and the sun; and Kleinman, in discussing Thomas' use of Christ's birth, death and resurrection (and fertility cult parallels), reveals the cyclical nature of religion. Taken together these analyses demonstrate the primary importance of cycle and process in the poem. Therefore, it seems to me that *Altarwise by Owl-light* might best be thought of in more general terms than those of either Olson, Tindall, or Kleinman, and an interpretation might best be sought which includes all the major motifs: the myths of Christianity and the solar gods as well as imagery of the cycle of the seasons, of heavenly bodies and of the life of man. Furthermore, an explanation should be pursued that demands the least amount of obscure knowledge. Thus, the following chapter will attempt to explicate the sonnets in the light of Thomas' injunction to "take the literal meaning" or the simplest meaning that the images provide; and although no prose paraphrase can convey the emotive quality of Thomas' language or the multiplicity and depth of his imagery, the following analysis is intended to demonstrate that *Altarwise by Owl-light* has a coherent meaning and that the meaning is available to any intelligent and thoughtful reader who is familiar with Thomas' nonrational, mystic technique.
Notes to Chapter One

1Constantine Fitzgibbon, The Life of Dylan Thomas (Boston, 1965), p. 168. The six poems were completed in a year and a half. Ralph Maud, Entrances to Dylan Thomas' Poetry (Pittsburgh, 1963), pp. 129-130, further states that the first seven sonnets were probably written in the summer of 1935. Sonnets eight through ten were written during Thomas' stay in Swansea, December, 1935 to February, 1936.


5Robert Lowell, "Thomas, Bishop and Williams," Sewanee Review, LV, no. 3 (Summer 1947), 493-496.


9George Steiner, "The Retreat from Word," Kenyon Review, XXIII (Spring 1961), 207.

10Julian Symons, "Obscurity and Dylan Thomas," Kenyon Review, II (Winter 1940), 70.

11David Holbrook, Dylan Thomas and Poetic Dissociation (Carbondale, 1964), p. 80. Mr. Holbrook's anti-Thomas sentiment is all too obvious. One wonders why he wrote a book about Thomas at all, considering, for example, chapter titles such as "Some of Them May Be Poems." Obviously, he is interested in presenting his case for the "true voice of poetry" and in discrediting Thomas for not writing the sort of poetry Holbrook appreciates. His attack on the sonnets is rather ridiculous considering that the offending childish image ("my long gentleman") is not thought of by most critics as a "genital organ" but rather as Christ, or more specifically, Christ's wound.
12 Marjorie Adix, "From Dylan Thomas: Memories and Appre-
ciations," A Casebook on Dylan Thomas, ed. by John Malcolm


14 Ibid., pp. 47-48.

15 Francis Scarfe, Auden and After (London, 1942), pp. 105-
106. First quotation is from page 106, second from page 105.

16 Marshall W. Stearns, "Unsex the Skeleton: Notes on the

Mr. Stanford's consideration of the sonnets is quite brief,
completed in only one page which consists primarily of a
quotation from Scarfe.

18 Ralph Maud, Entrances (see note one) p. 47-48, 97-101
and "Thomas' Sonnet I," Explicator, XIV (December 1955), 16.

19 Among the critics to treat the theme of process and
time are Ralph Maud, Entrances, pp. 57-80; David Aivaz, "The
Poetry of Dylan Thomas," Hudson Review, III (Autumn 1950),
382-404; and Ralph Mills, Jr., "Dylan Thomas: The Endless


21 William T. Moynihan, The Craft and Art of Dylan Thomas
(Ithica, N. Y., 1966), pp. 254-255. The quotation is from
page 254. Moynihan's interpretation is perhaps more complex
than the short summary would indicate. He sees another
level on which the voyager is everyman. Furthermore, his
analysis of Thomas' sexual attitudes and imagery is excellent.

22 G. S. Fraser, "Dylan Thomas," Casebook, p. 44. Reprinted

23 Olson, 120 pp.

24 Ibid., p. 64.

25 Ibid., pp. 63-89.

26 Ibid., first quotation from page 85, second from page 68.

27 Treece, p. 149. (See passage quoted in answer to Edith
Sitwell in Chapter two, explication of Sonnet I.) Thomas'
statement regarding Edith Sitwell's interpretation does not,
of course, completely discredit Olson's interpretation.
However, since Thomas died (1953) before Olson's study was published (1954), one can never really know if Thomas would agree with him. Yet since Thomas' interpretation points to a rather literal, visual, surrealistic interpretation of the poem, chances seem good that he did not intend the exact astrological parallels Olson suggests. Moreover, although a poem is not limited by the intention of the author, it is quite unlikely that involved astrological parallels could creep in without the author's full intention; and while a poet's prose statements are not necessarily the best authority on his poetry, in a poem as difficult as *Altarwise* by *Owl-light* any help the poet may give should certainly not be ignored. In this case, especially, Thomas' remarks seem to be sincerely calculated to explain the lines in question and to counter "wrong" interpretations.

27 Tindall, pp. 126-144.

29 *Loc. cit.* Specific page references for quotations in order of their occurrence in the discussion of Tindall's work: "Although...," p. 127; "Read in...," p. 127; "young Thomas...," p. 133; "the parents...," p. 139; "mask of scholars," p. 141; "pyramidal...," "bed," and "the part...," p. 142; "devoted to...," p. 143; "father provides...," "mother provides...," "Pluck...," and "Lop...," p. 136.

30 Kleinman, 146 pp.

31 *Loc. cit.* Quotations in the order of their appearance in the discussion of Kleinman's ideas: "are a deeply...," p. 10; "The pattern...," p. 12; "the first...," p. 45; "The tenth...," p. 119; and "The first seven...," p. 11.


33 Moynihan, p. 32. Recalled by Lady Snow (the former Pamela Hansford Johnson) to Mr. Moynihan.

34 Kleinman, pp. 1-146.

35 I have, perhaps, over-simplified critical approaches to Eliot's poetry. I have done so, however, simply to throw light on the sonnets. The sonnets are almost primitive in their mysticism; whereas the adjective "primitive" could never apply to the *Four Quartets*. Moreover, my remarks about *The Waste Land* were by no means meant to suggest that if one explained the allusions in the poem, one has explained the beauty and greatness of the poem as poetry; they meant merely to suggest that one then knows what the poem "means."

36 Moynihan, p. 36. The quoted statement was recalled by Lady Snow in a conversation with Mr. Moynihan.
37See chapter three for a fuller discussion of the relation of Thomas' vision to that of primitive societies.

38Korg., p. 27.

39Dylan Thomas, *The Collected Poetry of Dylan Thomas* (New York, 1957), p. 81. Further quotations from the *Altarwise* sonnets will not be noted, but all quotations are from *Altarwise* by Owl-light as it appears on pages 80-85 in the above edition of *Collected Poetry*.


41Treese, p. 127.
Chapter Two

The sonnets first appeared in the December, 1935, issue of *Life and Letters Today* as a group of seven sonnets under the title of "Poems for a Poem."\(^1\) When the sequence appeared in book form in *Twenty-five Poems*, the last three sonnets had been added and a publisher's statement on page vii informed the reader that "the last poem in the book contains the first ten sections of a work in progress."\(^2\) Thomas, however, never added to the work, perhaps conscious that as they stood, the ten sonnets formed a coherent unity. Indeed, since Francis Scarfe's examination of the sonnets in *Auden and After*, in which he pronounced the sequence to be a coherent unity which should "not be considered separately,"\(^3\) most critics have considered the ten sonnets as together forming one long poem. Scarfe's assumption is almost undeniably correct, but most critics have also followed Marshall Stearns' pronunciation in "Unsex the Skeleton: Notes on the Poetry of Dylan Thomas," that the eighth sonnet is "the climax in a series of loosely connected sonnets."\(^4\) On the surface this statement seems credible enough since the sonnets are religious poems and the eighth sonnet presents the crucifixion. However, the eighth sonnet is in itself anticlimactic since it follows the discovery of the shape of the universe in Sonnet VII. In this regard, it is important to note that Sonnet VII was originally the final poem of the sonnet sequence. Thus, the first seven sonnets portray the poet's quest for shape or order in the universe, and the
final three sonnets further elucidate the theme, exploring the consequences of this truth and discovering what comfort there is for mankind. To demonstrate this thesis, however, one must examine the individual sonnets.

Sonnet I

Sonnet I begins, in William Tindall's words, with obscure magnificence. The first two lines and the last two of this sonnet are haunting and in between are many wonders. Puzzling characters are around, doing strange things. A gentleman, a devil, an atlas-eater, a dog, a mandrake, an old cock, and another gentleman (or the same) crowd a landscape by Dali. Tropics and atlas make this unearthly scenery our earth, with stars on their rounds above. As we respond to these marvels, our minds, teased by hints, clamor for fact.

As Tindall implies, the extreme ambiguity of the first sonnet seems purposeful. As Thomas introduces his theme of the search for order and meaning in the world, the reader is called upon to make a corresponding effort to discover meaning in the chaos of the poem. And, with a careful reading, the sonnets can be understood by the reader to the same degree that the universe can be understood by the poet, while the extreme obscurity and the hints of further meanings in the sonnets approximate in the reader the same hesitation felt by the poet in accepting his metaphysical solution as permanent and as finally true.

The poet begins with a statement of his intention to undertake a religious quest to find the meaning of this chaotic world. He is "altarwise," religiously seeking wisdom, and is traveling by "owl-light," indicating the time
of day (dusk)\(^6\) and the insufficiency of the spiritual light available to him in his quest. Moreover, the reference to the owl is propitious since the owl is associated with wisdom (the owl is sacred to Athena, Goddess of Wisdom)\(^7\) and the protagonist and the owl share analogous fates: the owl must by necessity seek its prey in the dark of night as the poet must seek wisdom in a spiritual darkness in which truth seems elusive. The protagonist is in the "half-way house," half-way both to knowledge and to death, \(^8\) for we learn that "the gentleman lay graveward with his furies." Furthermore, "half-way" simply indicates the suspense accompanying the attempt to be somewhere that one is not, a suspense approximating torture since the mythological "furies" remind the protagonist of the reality and inevitability of death.

Abaddon, in the third line, refers to the "Angel of the Bottomless Pit," who, as a personification of the "place of perishing," is a traditional symbol for death. \(^9\) That he is "the hangnail cracked from Adam" indicates that death is inherent in the flesh, perhaps because of Adam's sin. \(^10\) The following three lines begin the recurring journalistic metaphor\(^11\) in the surrealistic scene in which "the atlas-eater with a jaw for news," or one who devours the world in search of news or truth, "bit out the mandrake with to-morrow's scream." Replying to Dame Edith Sitwell, Thomas partially explains these lines,

She doesn't take the literal meaning: that a world-devouring ghost-creature bit our the horror of to-morrow from a gentleman's loins. A "jaw for news" is an obvious variation of "a nose for news," and means
that the mouth of the creature can taste already the horror that has not yet come, or can sense its coming, can thrust its tongue into news that has not yet been made, can savour the enormity of the progeny before the seed stirs, can realize the crumbling of dead flesh before the opening of the womb that delivers that flesh to tomorrow.12

The "dog among the fairies" suggests Cerberus, the guardian of the gates of Hades,13 Thomas himself (Portrait of an Artist as a Young Dog), or perhaps, the jarring material and fleshly world of sexuality and death ever present in the spiritual quest ("among the fairies").

All these interpretations seem relevant when seen in conjunction with the reference to a mandrake which Thomas, in the above lines, associates with "a gentleman's loins" and with birth. Helpful to an understanding of these lines, also, is a quotation from ancient authorities giving instructions on the avoidance of death when uprooting a mandrake:

The mandrake is a root which shrieks terribly when you pull it out of the ground; [The legendary shriek was thought to be lethal.] it is, indeed, so dangerous that you must not try to pull it: better tie a dog to the stalk and then entice the dog towards you with a bonne bouche; stop your ears by way of precaution, and use your eyes to see the last dying agonies of the dog who has pulled the root for you. Then go and pick it up. To your surprise, you will find the root to have a human form, sometimes male, and sometimes female....14

Thus, in his reference to the mandrake Thomas has seized upon an image which simultaneously suggests Adam's "fork," or his loins, and a new human being, with overtones of great agony and the threat of death.15 "With to-morrow's scream" suggests birth, of the poet, or of Christ, or of any man; yet, the birth is dependent upon a simultaneous castration.
Since throughout the sequence, masculine sexuality is equated with life, castration is the symbol for death, as in Sonnet VII in which Christ's death is referred to with the words, "unsex the skeleton." Thus, birth is associated with death. On one level, this means that the birth of one generation means the death of the older generation; the birth of a son suggests the death of the father. But the image also suggests that death is inherent in life. Because man is matter and symbolically because Adam fell, the moment of birth is the beginning of the process of dying.

The next six lines are purposefully ambiguous, suggesting simultaneously Christ and death (Abaddon). "Penny-eyed," a reference to the old burial custom of placing pennies on the eyelids of the dead, heightens the horror pervading the sonnet since the "gentleman of wounds" is walking death. If the "gentleman of wounds" is the resurrected Christ, "old cock from nowheres and the heaven's egg" is a reference to the virgin birth. He is "hatched on one leg" because he has only one parent. However, this dominant image is undercut to some extent by the suggestion that the truth that seems to be that of redemptive Christianity, suggested by the imagery of the birth of Christ, is really an image of death, which is an "old cock from nowheres and the heaven's egg" because death is inexplicable, but is an inescapable part of life. Thus, the poet's cradle is scraped by "a walking word," suggesting both the possibility that Christ, as "the word," represents the order or structure of the
universe and, hence, gives life meaning and the possibility that the "word" is simply "that night of time" or the fact of death. Therefore, at this point in the poem what the poet means by "the Christward shelter" is ambiguous. On one hand, he is holding out the Christian explanation of life as possibly a viable one, and on the other, he suggests that it is merely a childish shelter from the physical fact of death. The sonnet ends with the elusive speaker (Christ, Abaddon, or the poet) asserting his identity with all mankind. Speaking in common terms, "and share my bed with Capricorn and Cancer" means that he shares with all men, under all astrological signs. Moreover, as Kleinman explains, "together, the Northern tropic of Cancer and Southern Capricorn give a composite picture of the solar gods." Therefore, the sonnet closes with an image of the protagonist as, simultaneously, all men and all gods.

Since Sonnet I introduces the reader to the major themes and motifs in the sequence and familiarizes him with the technique to be employed, a close examination of the first sonnet is rewarding. As has been indicated previously in this paper, Thomas' use of confusing and obscure images is purposeful, forcing the reader immediately to assume the position of a searcher in a confused universe. The faint journalistic metaphor in the sonnet reminds one of a teasing headline which gives the facts in such an abbreviated form that rather than conveying truth, it is designed to induce the reader to want to know more. Similarly, the ambiguity
concerning the identity of the protagonist in the sonnet coupled with veiled suggestions that the speaker is Abaddon, Christ, the poet, or an everyman figure forces the reader to maintain all these personages in his mind while reading the poem, seeing each statement as possibly applying to all the possible speakers simultaneously. The final image, then, identifies all the possible protagonists with each other since they all share the same attributes. This system of correspondences between the poet, mankind, Christ, solar gods and the universe in general is further developed in the following sonnets, but because the reader is forced by the extreme ambiguity of the first sonnet simultaneously to think of each possible protagonist as the subject of every ambiguous statement, he is predisposed to accept the position of the poet that there is an identity between them all. Furthermore, Thomas uses much the same technique by continually employing highly connotative religious references such as "altarwise" and "gentleman of wounds" as well as denotative Christian references such as "Adam" and "Christward." The reader must continually keep in mind the Christian myth as a possible answer to the spiritual quest, but since the references are always ambiguous and usually can be interpreted as references to death, it is impossible in the first few sonnets to discover whether or not the poet sees the Christian religion as the true explanation of reality.

The references to Christianity are further complicated
by the tone of the poem. Much of the imagery of Sonnet I is flippant or jaunty, as for example, "Abaddon in the hang-nail cracked from Adam." The irreverent tone is pushed almost to the point of a blasphemous joke as, for example, in the humorous reference to Christ, emphasizing the virgin birth ("old cock from nowheres.") This irreverence as well as Thomas' frequent use of slang continually undercutss the Christian references, suggesting by the rejection of traditional sanctimonious language in reference to religion that his will be a frank reappraisal of Christian dogma. Moreover, his surprising and sometimes almost shocking employment of language jolts the reader, temporarily freeing him of his preconceptions about poetry and about religion. The reader must approach the poem with an open mind, for the tone (like the obscurity) of the poem forces the reader either to read the poem on Thomas' own terms, seeing the world with his eyes, or to reject the poem as irreverent nonsense. The almost jeering tone alternated with an earnest seriousness, furthermore, poetically approximates the defensive humor often employed by young iconoclasts when speaking of the subjects most important to them. Therefore, whether or not Thomas consciously intended this effect, the tone is one appropriate to the gropings of a young man searching for ultimate truth.

Veiled references in Sonnet I introduce all the major themes and motifs developed in the following sequence. Perhaps the most important of these is the idea of human
life as cycle. Emphasizing this concept in the mandrake image, Thomas makes an identification which seems to come naturally to him, an identification of the father with the son in which the death of one becomes the birth of the other. In "Before I Knocked," a poem written somewhat earlier than the *Altarwise* sonnets, Thomas expresses much the same idea.

> Before I knocked and flesh let enter
> With liquid hands tapped on the womb,
> I who was shapeless as the water
> That shaped the Jordan near my home
> Was brother to Mnetha's daughter
> And sister to the fathering worm....

> You who bow down at cross and altar,
> Remember me and pity Him
> Who took my flesh and bone for armour
> And doublecrossed my mother's womb.

Here, too, the poet expresses the concept that the poet is both child and father and that death is inherent in birth. To be born is to be "doublecrossed" into death. And in this poem as in Sonnet I, Thomas makes an identification between Christ and himself and between God and his father, which becomes a four way identification since he identifies father and son. In Sonnet I these ideas combine with the motif of the human cycle of birth and death. The emphasis on man's sexual nature, introduced in the mandrake as an image for loins, begins a series of phallic images in the sonnet sequence that, far from demonstrating childish exhibitionism as Holbrook charges, serve as convenient symbols for life and energy. The frequent employment of "bone" imagery as phallic metaphor emphasizes the close relationship between the flesh and death, while the frequent transfiguration
of phallic symbol to a ladder to the stars demonstrates that man, through possessing life, begins to seek to understand it: a consideration of the mystery of sexual experience leads to a consideration of the mystery of religion and of existence itself.

Furthermore, the first sonnet introduces the world of process or cycle in terms of weather, especially in the recurrent reference to winds. In lines eight through sixteen the "cock" ("With bones unbuttoned to the half-way winds, / Hatched from the windy salvage on one leg"), in suggesting a weathercock or weathervane which reveals the direction of the wind and, thereby, aids weather prediction, is an effective symbol for the agent capable of revealing the truth about the world of process, whether the cock is Christ or Abaddon. Process is further emphasized in the repeated images of birth with accompanying overtones of death suggesting the cyclical process of life, while the reference to Capricorn and Cancer suggests the cyclical progress of the sun. Thus, through the chaos of obscure imagery of Sonnet I emerges the dominant image of process and cycle, birth and death. Moreover, the images of birth throughout the sonnet introduce the metaphor of the cycle of life as an organizing principle that, as Tindall has explained, serves as a framework for the sonnet sequence (death occurring in Sonnet VIII). The reference to Christ's birth reveals that the sonnets begin in winter, and, as Olson has established, the poems roughly recreate the cycle
of the seasons, beginning and ending in the same month. Thus, the organization of the sonnets as a quest for meaning and spiritual truth is supplemented by firm suggestions throughout the sonnets of natural cycle as the fundamental organizing pattern of the universe (as various cycles form secondary structural patterns in the sonnets).

Sonnet II

Sonnet II, continuing the cyclical pattern of the sonnets, employs the metaphor of the care of a young child (as Sonnet I dealt with birth). More importantly, Sonnet II moves from the declaration of a religious quest amid confusing and teasing ambiguity to define just what the poet is looking for. In line one the poet's reference to "shape" indicates that he seeks to find the organizing principle of the universe and, hence, the meaning of life. As might be expected, the poet's first reference is to metaphor, the traditional structural device of poetry, but he also stresses the idea that all solutions must take into account the fact of death. "Death is all metaphors" suggests, moreover, that the idea of death is not yet quite real to the poet, but must be dealt with since all life serves to prove the inevitability of death.

Looking for a place to begin his quest, the poet suggests in the phrase "shape in one history" that perhaps the organization or pattern of the universe can be found in a single life. He then proceeds to elaborate on his idea. He presents
a child "shooting up," progressing from birth to youth. The reference in line three to medieval pelican lore describing the pelican feeding her young with her own blood by piercing an artery in her breast presents a child vampirishly feeding off his parent. Here, again, the poet suggests as he did in Sonnet I that the birth of the offspring is at the expense of the parent. The meaning of this image, however, is expanded beyond the implications of Sonnet I. The parent is the "planet-ducted pelican of circles" or the universe, which is presented as sexual in nature ("the gender's strip"), and, therefore, what is true of human process is extended to the entire universe. The "child of the short spark" is an image suggestive of conception or an electrical image for the miraculous infusion of life into matter. He is in a "shapeless country" because he (as well as the poet) is in a world he cannot structure or understand.

The playful change in the next line from "short spark" to "long stick" signifies growing up, but is also a phallic image for the attainment of sexual maturity. Moreover, a "long stick" is the name of an obsolete instrument used in measuring heights and distances in navigation, and is, therefore, an instrument used in determining shape and in discovering the truth about reality. Thus, Thomas skillfully manipulates his phallic imagery in an extended and ever-changing metaphor. The "long stick" becomes "the horizontal cross-bones of Abaddon," reminding the reader that death is inherent in the flesh, and then becomes Jacob's ladder.
climbing to the stars. In describing the ladder, Thomas makes certain that the reader has not missed the subtle interrelationships of his stick imagery. The ladder is composed of "rung bone and blade, the verticals of Adam"—sexuality and death. Given the components of the ladder, the end of the search seems preordained since at the top of the ladder the protagonist finds only the same truth he has discovered in his climb. The last four lines, alluding sardonically to the Biblical phrase, "the hairs of your head are numbered," state that the hairs that grow from man (like Adam's hangnail) are nettles (suggestive of the thorns of the crucifixion) and feathers (reminiscent of Thomas' image for death, "death's feather"). Thus, the truth found at the top of the ladder is suffering and death, "and the hemlock-headed in the wood of weathers." Ending the sonnet with "wood of weathers" reminds the reader once again of the poet's fear that suffering is causally connected to the world of process (weather) in which we live, while the reference to hemlock reminds the reader of suffering and martyrdom which may or may not bring redemption.

Sonnet III

Following Sonnet II, which began with the history of one representative child and extended the metaphor to the stars, Sonnet III takes place in the heavens, developing the metaphor introduced in Sonnet II of the universe as parent to the child. Since the action takes place at the top
of the ladder built in Sonnet II, Olson's geography of the constellations appearing in the sonnet is helpful in providing a background, although not absolutely necessary in determining the meaning of the sonnet. Olson interprets the poem as

beginning with the birth of the "lamb" after the winter solstice. The lamb is the young Aries, later to be the Ram under whose sign spring begins; but before that happens the "three dead seasons" (or winter seasons) of Capricorn, Aquarius, and Pisces must be accomplished. The "climbing grave" in which these signs are fulfilled is the immensely long serpent constellation of Hydra (the Serpent is Death, therefore, the grave), which rises in the east under these signs and slowly, mounting almost to the zenith, works westward. As the sun enters Aries, spring begins, and Hydra descends; hence it is "horned down," or rather its tail ("butt") is, for this is last "horned down"; the Ram with its horns has put down the serpent-constellation. Hydra is "tree-tailed" because its tail is slim and upright as a tree, and because it is to remind us of the serpent and the tree in Eden. It is "horned down with skull-foot and skull of toes"; Thomas interprets the constellation Cameleopardus as a sea nettle, jellyfish, or medusa, the shape of which it resembles more than it does a giraffe.38

This quotation does not explain the sonnet, but it does indicate the extreme care with which Thomas fashioned his sonnets. Since this sonnet takes place in the heavens, the images he evokes have their parallels in the constellations.

The primary metaphor employed in this very ambiguous and obscure sonnet is that of the universe as parent and womb. With this metaphor Thomas extends his conclusions about life and death to include the heavens and the entire universe. The sestet recounts a mythic explanation of life, sin, and death leading up to the birth of the protagonist who is simultaneously the poet and Christ.38 The three dead
seasons could be the three days Christ was in the tomb or the winter season, symbol of death before resurrection in the spring. In either case the image is one of waiting for birth or rebirth. A "wether" is a castrated ram who leads the flock. "Adam's wether" is then death which results from the "tree-tailed worm that mounted Eve," for evil, or simply sexuality as a symbol of the flesh, brings with it death. Man is "horned down with skullfoot and the skull of toes" because he will die, but the reference to "skullfoot and the skull of toes" also suggests Christ's crucifixion before which Christ walked barefoot up the "hill of skulls." Thus, the reference to Christ prepares the way for the subsequent birth in the lines following, while once more suggesting the possibility of finding meaning and perhaps redemption for mankind through Christianity.

In the first four lines of the octave, the life of the protagonist is seen from the heavens in its totality, and the poet is able to determine the pattern of his life. The universe is seen as a womb as in a similar poem in which Thomas speaks of the heavens as "the ribbed original of love." "Rip of the vaults" in line seven refers to the protagonist in the womb. Life is seen as transient as Rip Van Winkle (a facetious reference to the longevity of God) with his "marrow-ladle" "dipped me breast-deep in the descended bone." The image of the "marrow-ladle" dipping into life graphically portrays the protagonist's birth and death as he is lowered into life and raised up again in a cyclical movement. In
addition to the primary meaning of "marrow," a secondary meaning of the term is "vitality," and a further meaning is "the essence of anything." Therefore, "marrow-ladle" means life-dispenser. Moreover, the use of "marrow" prepares for "descended bone" as a metaphor for life. Since the ladle is taken "out of the wrinkled undertaker's van," the agent for the generation of life comes from death. The use of "bone" as a phallic symbol of sexual energy and life, and the full implication of the poet's viewing life as a "descended bone" would be lost had he not created in the reader's mind associations of sexuality, physical death and spiritual aspiration with his symbol in Sonnet II. The cyclical movement of death, to life, to death again, represented by the ladle image for human process, is continued in the final four lines by the heavenly bodies when Aries, lamb of spring, becomes the dying Ram of winter. The natural world, as well as the world of man, is cyclical. Even the constellations follow a cyclical pattern.

Throughout the sonnet, reminiscent of frequent Biblical allusions to mankind as "a flock," the ovine imagery, which begins hopefully with the Pascal lamb, becomes increasingly pessimistic as the "wether" introduces sin and death. Finally, the imagery becomes completely secularized, for the astrological "Black Ram" confronts the human flock with the inevitability of death, but with no Christian hope.

The sonnet ends with the poet still observing from his Jacob's ladder in the sky. From this height he has been
able to discern nothing but "our weathering changes" or the cyclical world of process. Then he hears "the antipodes" celebrating two springs. Since the autumnal equinox of the northern hemisphere is the vernal equinox of the southern, there are two springs occurring in the total circle of the globe per year. Therefore, the antipodes celebrate the truth of cyclical process, and the poet's quest thus far has only served to confirm his fears. He has found no proof to support his hope of a metaphysical, perhaps Christian, answer that could mitigate the sufferings of man by providing meaning for his life.

Sonnet IV

In Sonnet IV, the poet recoils from his vision. Unsatisfied with the natural explanation of life as process, he seeks a more meaningful explanation. Casting off his old assumptions, he begins as if he were a young boy asking fresh vital questions. The sonnet begins with the analogy of artist to God as creator, as the protagonist asks, "What is the metre of the dictionary?", or, how can one find order in the chaos of data? Then, in lines two and three the protagonist asks specific questions about shape and size as if by determining shape he could define crucial concepts concerning mankind. "The size of genesis" questions man's origin, suggesting the possibility of God, and "the short spark's gender?" asking about sex as a metaphor for the flesh, introduces the natural world and the reality of
mortality. The protagonist, still reeling from his vision in Sonnet III, is haunted by the image of "shade without shape." He receives indications of reality, but is not certain of the correct structure or meaning of these visions. Therefore, "shade without shape" implies that life has no meaning, at least not any that the poet can discern. "The shape of Pharaoh's echo" is a question about immortality. Pharaoh's echo could be "an obelisk" or since Pharaoh no longer exists, simply death. Thus, the poet is asking what remains when we die. Finally, his basic fear is revealed: "My shape of age" whispers of death. The crucial question is "which sixth of a wind blew out the burning gentry" or who is responsible for death; yet, the nature of the poet's fear as well as the implied answer to his question is reflected in the question. Again, wind refers to the natural world of process in which death is a natural event, while "burning gentry" suggests both that the poet is impressed with the passionate vitality of man and that men are like candles who by their very nature burn themselves out.

This series of questions is brought to an end with the statement, "Questions are hunchbacks to the poker marrow." Since the protagonist was dipped with the "marrow-ladle" into the "descended bone" in the preceding sonnet, "poker marrow" acquires all the associations of the marrow-bone-ladle image complex. Thus, questions about the "shape" of life (the marrow of the poker) are as inadequate as a hunch-backed poker and render the searcher helpless and spiritually
deformed. He must still, however, face the fundamental problem and must keep searching and questioning. In line seven the "bamboo man" is an empty "poker" or "bone." Because he lacks the marrow of life, the bamboo man represents death, and perhaps also suggests the emptiness of life when man has nothing to believe in but death. Obsessed with the fundamental reality of death, the poet in the lines, "Corset the boneyards for a crooked boy?" and "Button your bodice on a hump of splinters," reprimands men for their refusal to face the fact of death and for their unspoken agreement to hide the unpleasant fact from themselves, from others, and from the protagonist: one must accept and understand death in order to understand the shape and meaning of life.

In the last six lines of the sonnet, Thomas employs the metaphor of photography in an attempt to capture the shape of life in order to understand it. "My camel's eyes" is a play on camera's eyes and also alludes to the manger scene. Once more the reader is required to see the protagonist as Christ as well as the poet and everyman. Furthermore, "my camel's eyes will needle through the shroud" alludes to Matthew 19:24. 

Again I say unto you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. [King James Version]

The eye of the protagonist will "needle through the shroud" by accomplishing the difficult task of going past the physical reality of death, suggested in "shroud," to find the meaning
behind the fact, although, like the rich man, he may be required to lose everything (in his case, perhaps, faith rather than goods) in order to find truth.

Continuing the metaphor of a camera as an agent which discovers shape and meaning, the speaker tries to capture life through love, but the images he sees are distorted, "mushroom features," literally resulting from the distortion of an image reflected in a camera lens or in an eye and, figuratively, by a mind possibly not entirely capable of discerning absolute truth. Although the bread-sided field alludes hopefully to manna, expressing the protagonist's hope that God will provide answers as He is said to have once provided bread, the "stills snapped by night" do not seem to satisfactorily structure life or reveal truth for the sonnet ends with a picture of the heavens "arc-lamped thrown back upon the cutting flood." The image is one of cutting or editing, but the protagonist sees the editing, a metaphor for ordering and defining, as a hopeless task since he has the entire heavens to arrange. Consequently, he describes the heavens as a "cutting flood" for he could never meaningfully edit the confusing flood of impressions he receives.

Sonnet V

In Sonnet V the metaphor of photography is replaced by fleeting references to other means of determining shape, beginning with the cinema, then moving quickly to fortunetelling
(cards), to evangelical Christianity, and, finally, to an exploration of the possibilities of romantic vision and literature. The sonnet begins with the picture of the Archangel Gabriel, the angel of the last trump, as the hero of a Hollywood western. This is the world of the stereotype, of the easy answer. Religion is shown as at best nothing more than superstitious fortune-telling. Christian salvation, achieved by Christ's triumph over death, is spoken of as a card trick: "From Jesu's sleeve trumped up the king of spots" speaks of Jesus as a card-shark, hustling death. The "sheath-decked jacks," or knaves, suggest the two thieves crucified with Christ, and the queen suggests Mary, whose heart is "shuffled" because it was wounded. Furthermore, since in the last stanza of "my Hero Bares His Nerves" (a shorter poem by Thomas) Thomas writes, "of birth and death, the two sad knaves of thieves," he may again be expressing in Sonnet V the twin sad facts of process and death. The Christian story is told by an evangelist, "the fake gentleman in suit of spades, Black-tongued and tipsy from salvation's bottle," and therefore is only a parody of the Christian explanation of reality seen as a drunken escape.

The octave reveals the protagonist's despair as he turns to Romantic literature in his search for truth. Like both Ishmaels, the protagonist is a searcher, but he despairs when he discovers that "my Byzantine Adam," like the famous Byzantine iconography, is only an artifact. As the Biblical Ishmael fell in the wilderness from lack of water, the
speaker of the poem falls from loss of blood perhaps because he lacks the redemptive blood of Christ or because he, as Christ, has suffered so intensely. The "milky mushrooms" ambiguously both quench the hunger for knowledge and slay the speaker. Kleinman suggests that Thomas had in mind two similar species of mushrooms endemic to the British Isles. One, called Lactarius subdulas (or milk mushroom), is very white and good. The other, the Amanita verna (or the "destroying angel"), is almost identical in appearance to the first, but deadly. "A climbing sea" in line nine picks up the flood image from the preceding sonnet. This image evokes feelings of inevitability and of nature overpowering the protagonist with despair, while introducing the sea image necessary for the appearance of "Jonah's Moby." "And Jonah's Moby snatched me by the hair" suggests by the reference to "Jonah" punishment for the refusal to do God's will, and by the reference to "Moby" the demonic despair of an Ahab, trying to discover the truth about the universe. The images of Jonah's whale and Moby Dick are combined (as Melville links them in Father Mapple's sermon) because the truth that the protagonist of the poem seeks is primarily a religious one and because the contact of both Jonah and Ahab with the fearful whale resulted from the refusal or inability to trust God. "Snatched me by the hair" brings Samson to mind and perhaps also Absalom. As Samson lost his strength when Delilah "snatched" his hair and as Absalom lost his life when his hair caught in a tree, "Jonah's Moby,"
or religious despair, paralyses the speaker of the poem.

At the conclusion of *Moby Dick* Ahab has succumbed to the romantic sea (which offered both knowledge of the secrets of existence and the threat of destruction). So, too, at the conclusion of Sonnet V the protagonist is at the bottom of the sea where he has a vision mystically explaining life. The prolonged allusion to *Moby Dick* explains the "white bear" by "waste seas." Like Melville, the protagonist is horrified by unnatural whiteness. The horror he experiences is of the possibility of error—the possibility that what seems white, pure and innocent, is really evil, power and death in disguise. "Salt Adam," a sailor or voyager and the everyman protagonist of the poem, is found to be "cross-stroked" (the line which joins together musical notes) "to the frozen angel." The angel could be Satan, who is pictured as breast-high in ice in Dante's *Inferno*, or the image could refer to the inability to act resulting from despair, while the musical reference reminds the reader that the paralysis is related to the song of the sirens appearing throughout the sonnets. "Pin-legged on pole-hills" suggests both the crucifixion and a balancing act by the protagonist who is paralyzed by despair. A medusa is a beautiful jelly fish which ensnares its victims in its long hair-like tentacles, paralyzing them with its sting. Similarly, the medusa's namesake in Greek mythology was a beautiful girl, noted for her charms and the beauty of her hair. Minerva, however, changed Medusa's hair into serpents, and, thereafter, the
very sight of her serpent locks turned men to stone.\textsuperscript{78}

Kleinman says, moreover, that Thomas associated, and perhaps
confused, Medusa with Lilith, the consort of Satan who
ensnared victims by the fatal beauty of her hair.\textsuperscript{79} Thus,
the medusa represents, not only the paralysis resulting from
despair, but the principle of sexuality habitually associated
by Thomas with long hair.\textsuperscript{80} Sexuality is like the medusa
because it tempts man and results in his death. Without
faith, man is left alone with the flesh that he knows leads
to death. He is surrounded by an inexplicable world in
which polar bears, deceptively white, quote the pagan Virgil,\textsuperscript{81}
not Christ. The sonnet ends with a vision of "our lady."\textsuperscript{82}
However, this is not a reference to Mary. The lady in the
poem is the lady of the "sea-straw," connected with the
"sirens" who like the medusa lure men to their death. Thomas
is saying that "our lady" is Venus, goddess of the flesh.
Thus, the vision appearing in the romantic sea is an affirmation of the fleshly nature of man, necessitating his death.

Sonnet VI

Sonnet VI continues the mystic vision. Since life first evolved in the sea, it is appropriate that the protagonist, still at the bottom of the romantic sea of despair, should witness the creation of life in the "book of water." Although the setting is naturalistic, the sonnet echoes Genesis. In H. H. Kleinman's words, "Thomas reworks the opening verses of Genesis and the Fourth Gospel to produce an effect of a cosmic
To convey this idea, Thomas uses three main metaphors for creation. First, God's creation of the universe is presented as analogous to the artist's creation of a book or cartoon (especially in the first four lines). Second, the birth of the universe is presented as a sexual union resulting in a naturalistic birth (in lines five through eight and again in line fourteen). And third, creation is presented in an image of God as a candle who forms man from his tallow drippings. At the beginning of the sonnet God creates the world as if it were a cartoon or a book: his statement, "let there be light" split the "oyster vowels" (unspoken words or silence), and the "sea silence" is destroyed by "a wick of words."

In lines four through eight, the jellyfish is again used as a symbol of primeval sexuality, the medusa with its long tentacles (hair) representing the first female and the pin-hilled nettle (another jellyfish) representing the male. The medusa's reference to the "sea eye" both naturalistically describes the medusa (which looks something like an eye surrounded by long eyelashes) and alludes to the story of Perseus who defeated the mythological Medusa with the help of a stolen eye. The "pin-hilled nettle"'s "fork tongue" is both a phallic symbol and a symbol of the power of God who created the world with words. Thus, the world is pictured as sexually dynamic as "old cock from nowheres" (God) "lopped the minstrel tongue" (the sirens, or female tempters), while the legend of the Medusa reminds us of death: even the
first creation was sexual in nature and resulted in death.

The next few lines employ the metaphor of creation as a candle, created with the "wick of words." Thus, flesh, or tallow, comes from "the wax's tower," a phallic metaphor for God and a reference to the Medieval metaphor of the candle as symbol for Christ's purity. Pure bee's wax candles were used to represent God, but in this poem, the candle drips tallow, as what is created is fleshly, not pure. At this point in the sonnet, the world has been created. Adam with his highly unreliable mate ("a witch of cardboard") begins to name creation. Creation is "an evil index" because, although he names the seven seas, he cannot understand the order they represent. The sonnet ends with the grotesque "bagpipe-breasted ladies." These surrealistic sirens clean up the naturalistic remains of the birth of the world. The first created man, in his nightmare world, is already pictured as a creature of suffering, a "wound of manwax."

Sonnet VII

Sonnet VII, which was originally the last sonnet in the sequence, continues the metaphor begun in Sonnet VI. Creation, as the artistic process of the writing of a book, is finished. "Now stamp the Lord's Prayer on a grain of rice" is much like putting a brand on the finished product, and is, perhaps (considering Thomas' irreverent humor); a rather tawdry parody of the Biblical, "It is finished." Here, Thomas turns from his mocking mystic vision of the creation of the world to the
world itself. The world is "Bible-leaved of all the written
woods" (a play on written words) and is the manifestation
of God. Thus, Thomas says one must "strip to this tree: a
rocking alphabet, /Genesis in the root, the scarecrow word."
In other words, one must discover the message which the world,
as Bible, reveals to us. The terms, "strip" and "scarecrow,"
furthermore, are employed to convey that the truth which must
be found is the truth fundamental to man's destiny. Since
the "light's [truth's] language" is found in the "book of
trees," anyone who denies the "wind-turned statement" of
this gospel will be doomed.

In the final octave, Thomas tells us what that gospel
is. The prophetic voices, here again, are the sirens ("my
ladies with the teats of music"). They are female sea crea-
tures who, like the "sponge" of the natural world, suck "the
bell-voiced Adam out of magic" by denying him the luxury of
believing in a beautiful magic supernatural system governing
the world. Rather than singing of a God offering redemption,
the sirens sign of time and process: "Time, milk, and magic,
from the world beginning. /Time is the tune my ladies lend
their heartbreak." Finally, after the protagonist's agoniz-
ing search for the shape of the universe, he sees the organ-
izing principle behind it. The pattern of the universe,
extending from "bald pavilions" to the "house of bread," is natural and cyclical. Time gives the shape, and the shape
is the cycle of the seasons (the rose of spring becoming the
icicle of winter). Thus, the final two lines sum up the thesis
of the first seven sonnets:

Time tracks the sound of shape on man and cloud,
On rose and icicle the ringing handprint.

Throughout the first seven sonnets, Thomas, searching
for shape and meaning, has examined human life, the heavens,
the sea, and the earth. In each he has discovered the mes¬sage of the wind, of process and cycle, birth and death.
Yet, through the religious imagery present in each of the
seven sonnets, the poet has maintained the reader's awareness
of the hope of Christianity. Therefore, Thomas writes three
more sonnets, examining and redefining the meaning of the
Christian myth and attempting to reconcile humanity to the
truth that he has uncovered in Sonnets I-VII.

Sonnet VIII

Perhaps the most moving and beautiful of the sonnets
is Sonnet VIII in which Christ's crucifixion is presented as
a paradigm of human suffering unmitigated by the hope of
resurrection. "The crucifixion of the mountain" is presented
as excruciatingly painful. As H. H. Kleinman remarks, "The
clinical image of Christ as a raw nerve dipped in vinegar
emphasizes the bitterness and pain of his great humiliation.
And it leaves one with an astringent sense of time contracted
and shrunken into one thin nerve; a quivering, crucial moment
in history."93 Furthermore, the reference alludes to Matthew
27:48,94 the allusion to the vinegar given to Christ on the
cross beginning a series of specific parallels between the
crucifixion as recorded in the Gospels and the crucifixion
as reported in Sonnet VII. The identity of the speaker of the sonnet is at first quite ambiguous. In lines one and two the speaker appears to be an impartial reporter; yet in line three ("As tarred with blood as the bright thorns I wept") it becomes apparent that the speaker is Christ. Moreover, the image of the cross as "the gallow grave,/As tarred with blood" is reminiscent of "salt Adam," the everyman-voyager-protagonist of the poem who is seen as hanged in the gallows. In the lines following, the speaker's identity is increasingly universalized. Emphasizing the agony of the moment, the protagonist weeps "thorns" while "Mary in her grief,/Bent like three trees," (an effectively apt image demonstrating Mary's grief while linking her pain to that of the men on the three trees of the crucifixion), weeps pins and the entire world is presented as a wound ("the world's my wound"). Thus, sexual distinctions are forgotten as the Christ-figure on the cross and "the long wound's woman" are joined in their suffering, suffering that is shared by the entire world.

With Christ's universalized mythic identity established, the poet speaks in the octave of Christ (and himself) as "Jack Christ" or everyman. Instead of "ministering angels" the protagonist, faced with the reality of time and death ("time's nerve in vinegar"), has only "each minstrel angle," the point of view of the singing sirens. And, the universe "drove in the heaven-driven of the nails" because death is inevitable. In the next two lines, Jack Christ, both man
and woman, both god and man, speaks of the natural cyclical process that brings death:

Till the three-coloured rainbow [birth, life, and death] from my nipples
From pole to pole [the complete cycle] leapt round the snail-waked world [the world which is so slow to understand].

Christ's death affirms the natural truth of cyclical process, birth, life and death, and, as God, Christ shares in the sufferings of man. The world is slow to understand, but the "three-coloured rainbow," alluding to God's promise to Noah, offers hope while presenting the truth about human life. The protagonist by the "tree of thieves" (death) will "unsex the skeleton," suggesting both the death of sexual power, symbolizing real death, and a stripping bare of the truth: Christ's death was a final demonstration of the universality of death and of cyclical process.

"By this blowclock witness of the sun" in the next line is a complex image. Since an eclipse of the sun is said to have occurred at the moment Christ died, the "blowclock witness" suggests a correspondence between suffering mankind (or Christ) and the natural world, extending Thomas' identification of the poet with everyman (male and female) and with God and Christ to the solar system. However, the reference to the witness of the sun occurs in a poem which has primarily treated life as natural and material. In this light the blowclock is a violent image of a timebomb which explodes preconceptions and false beliefs. The "witness of the sun" in natural terms is simply that it, too, follows cyclical
processes. Far from standing still for the death of a god, it must operate under the same laws as God and man.

The last line of the sonnet renders the crucifixion as the excruciating awareness of the fact of death and the painful experience of all the world's suffering. Man, God, and the entire universe share in the necessity of the process of life and death. The redemption and the comfort offered is the power of humanity to share the sufferings of others. Each man is a Christ, for redemption comes from the human capacity, through suffering, to understand and to care as the story of Christ is seen as true and relevant in a mythic rather than literal sense. Man's redemption comes from the Christlike love of a man who can "suffer the heaven's children through my heartbeat."

Sonnet IX

Sonnet IX, coming directly after the sonnet on the crucifixion, explores the possibility of a resurrection. In this sonnet Thomas moves away from Christian mythology to the Egyptian myth of Osiris, which parallels the story of Christ, to emphasize that he has employed Christianity as myth not dogma. Osiris, who was the son of the earth god Geb and the sky goddess Nut, was responsible for cultivating grain and the vine and for the introduction of the law to the people. He was betrayed by Set, dismembered into fourteen pieces, collected, embalmed, and mummified. Legend tells that he was resurrected in the spring in the desert.
Although the sonnet does not mention Osiris directly, his myth is fundamental to Egyptian attempts to preserve life by mummification.

The resurrection of the dead was assured by planting the "grain-bed of Osiris" in the tomb. The bed was made of layers of papyrus upon which moistened earth was spread, sown with barley grains in a figure of Osiris. Aided by the moisture in the darkness of the tomb, the barley grains sprouted, thus outlining a "living" form of Osiris. This symbolic resurrection of the god implied the resurrection of the occupant of the tomb, since the barley represented not only Osiris but the deceased as well.107

Although this ritual was employed to avoid the ravages of process, the fertility rites underline Thomas' thesis. Whatever precautions man makes, the only resurrection is that of new life growing out of the decay of the old, barley sprouting from the tomb of a dead body. Consequently, in the sestet Thomas, demonstrating a detailed knowledge of Egyptian burial customs,108 presents various personages who attempted to gain immortality by mummification in an attempt to stop the natural process of life, death, and decay.

All the dead--the royal, the priestly, the scribal--are discovered by Thomas in the process of preserving themselves, as if they had become animated in the archives and pyramid texts. Their static procession in the stylized stance of Egyptian statuary, one foot directly in front of the other, is described by "natron footsteps"...."Buckle to lint and cloth their natron footsteps" brings to our eye the image of someone buckling on his overshoes, and at the same time we see mummies buckling or binding their petrified feet with linen bandages to the rest of their bodies. "Draw on the glove of prints" suggests someone putting on a glove or drawing chintz covers over furniture until we realize that the reference is to the vignette-decorated outer coverings of linen which conformed glovelike to the shape of the mummy. And lastly, "...dead Cairo's henna/Pour like a halo..." offers a cosmetic image of a hair rinse; but "dead Cairo"
reminds us of the ancient technique of tinting the hair of a mummy with henna and of adorning the dead with a band or diadem in the form of a uraeus. In the octave Thomas gives the result of their efforts. The only resurrection in the desert is the unearthing of mummies by the "mask of scholars" who share with the dead the mask of death. That the scholars are masked demonstrates that they too will die (the mask of death) and that they share in the drama (theatrical masks) which serves to mask the real facts of death by an elaborate fiction ("the linen spirit" or the fiction which supposes that resurrection can be accomplished by the wrapping of the body in cloth). "My long gentleman" who is "wed to dusts and furies," like the "long gentleman" of Sonnet I who "lay graveward with his furies," must die because he is a natural creature ("wed... to dusts") and is symbolically tortured by "furies," representing his own awareness of the reality of death.

The last four lines are burial instructions given by the wounded protagonist who seems to wish to share the hopes of the others since he requests "stones of odyssey" as a talisman to make certain his arrival in the promised land. However, the "stones of odyssey" also suggest that the fruit of his journey (odyssey) has been stones. Thus, his hope is small, for instead of looking forward to eternal life (world without end), he shares the fate of "priest and pharaoh" whose fate is eternal death ("world in the sand"). Therefore, he will lie down with the knowledge that death is final: "rivers of the dead around my neck." The sonnet ends,
however, as does the previous sonnet, with an image of community, for the protagonist is conscious that he shares the fate of every man. And, through the reference to fertility myth, he has suggested that although individual life ends, the cycle of life continues forever.

Sonnet X

Sonnet X, one of the most difficult of the sonnets, temporarily resolves the dilemma of the poet. The sonnet moves from imagery of chaos to imagery of a "flying garden" representing the pattern of the cycle of life as beautiful. The first line of the sonnet announces the end of the protagonist's Christian voyage. In contrast to "altarwise" in the first sonnet, the poet is now "atlaswise."\(^{116}\) The knowledge he has gained is not otherworldly. He has been brought face to face with the pattern of nature. The voyager is "half-way off the dummy bay," which may mean that he is half-way to death or that he is resisting the false bay of peace of unfounded religious hopes.\(^{117}\) The gospel of which the poet sings is the gospel of time. The gospel, or truth about the world, is seen as chaotic movement, process represented by "winged harbours" and the "blown seas." As seen through the "rockbirds' eyes," however, a pattern emerges. The "rockbird" is the protagonist. He is a bird both because he is a poet and because he is paralyzed by his knowledge of death and because he is structuring, that is making static, the chaos around him. Thus, the poet, as
everyman and as God the creator, says, "I image." The pattern he causes to emerge from the chaotic sea is "December's thorn screwed in a brow of holly." The thorns of the spring crucifixion are interchanged with the holly of the December birth, thus unifying once again birth and death in an image of both cycle and suffering.

This image, summarizing the content of Sonnets I-IX and concluding the sestet, is followed by a four line riddle tentatively alluding to the possibility of a creator responsible for the pattern. Peter, who is known for denying Christ, is questioned in heaven. He is to ask the "tall fish," or the first man to evolve, about creation. Again the Christian allusion to Peter is tempered by the natural reference to the evolutionary process. The "foam-blue channel" alludes to the rising of Venus from the sea, an additional secular reference. The rhubarb man probably symbolizes the possibility of a God, for the bitter rhubarb suggests the sufferings of Christ: the stalks of the rhubarb are reddish in color and are suggestive of a long wound associated by Thomas with Christ in Sonnet VIII. Furthermore, the flower is white, suggesting purity, containing three-angled or winged fruits of one seed each, a possible symbol of the trinity. The question asked, then, is whether a suffering god created the pattern of life, which is spoken of beautifully as a "flying garden" that sails round the sea-ghost (death). That the rhubarb, as symbol of God, must be cut into pieces in order to propagate, demonstrates that whether or not God is responsible for the
process, he shares in man's suffering and in his death. Moreover, since Thomas has created an identity between God and man, the riddle is also a proud question, "What is man, this creature who evolved from the sea?" Thomas has presented man as a creature of suffering, pain and death, yet one who can understand and share the sufferings of man and gods.

The sonnet ends with a vision of the pattern of the universe as a beautiful circular garden. The "two bark towers" suggest life and death since the pun on "bark" alludes to previous images of trees as phallic images for life and the "dog among the fairies" in Sonnet I as an image for death. Moreover, the "two bark towers" suggest the two trees in the garden of Eden: the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge which brought death. The poem ends with a sexual image of life as cycle, prepared for by Thomas' elaborate phallic conceits, identifying the moment of conception or of birth, with death. This identification is reaffirmed in the final image of the "rude, red tree," signifying an acceptance of the human cycle. The poet, however, does not stop with this affirmation, for the final image is also suggestive of the crucifixion. Therefore, hope is presented that man's suffering will bring redemption through "mercy" and love.

Sonnet X concludes the sequence with unmistakable finality. The protagonist has moved from birth in the first sonnet, to death in the eighth, to the possibility of resurrection in the ninth, and, finally, to a reconciliation to human process in the tenth. He began, in Sonnet I, in December with
Christ's birth and ends, in Sonnet X, with "December's thorn," having examined the process of time and the cycle of the seasons. The air of finality is further conveyed by the repetition of key words of the first stanza in the last (for example, "Altarwise" becomes "atlaswise," "half-way house" and "half-way winds" become "hold half-way off," and the "walking word" becomes the "blown word"),¹²⁴ and the quest is brought to a close with the imagery of the end of a voyage.

The poem is not a success, however, merely because it is a coherent unity. As was suggested in the introductory discussion of the sonnets, Thomas does communicate the experience of the quest. Moreover, his images, although ambiguous, are extremely rich and textured, rewarding close analysis and yielding a coherent, if not complete, meaning to any educated persevering reader equipped with a good dictionary, a handbook of myths, and a Bible.¹²⁵ And although in this explication of the sonnets certain allusions have occasionally been explained with reference to rather little known specific information, that information is rarely crucial to the sonnet. For example, in Sonnet IX Thomas is quite precise and correct in referring to Egyptian burial customs and a detailed discussion of the sonnet should explain these allusions. If Thomas' reader, however, did not have access to such information, it would still be obvious to him that Thomas was writing about mummification and the unearthing of mummies. Knowledge of details such as the meaning
of "Cairo's henna" add depth to one's understanding of the poem, but such images primarily serve simply as exotic sounding detail. Most educated readers, moreover, would immediately remember the similarity between Egyptian fertility myths and the events of Christ's death and resurrection, and, therefore, the general meaning of the sonnet would be quite obvious to them.

Furthermore, the sonnets are successful as religious sonnets. The poet explores the position of modern man who searches for meaning and finds only process. Recreating the search for meaning in the first seven sonnets, Thomas also prepares the reader for a new interpretation of religion—and he prepares him by the ambiguity and obscurity of the poem. Far from demonstrating technical ineptitude as critics of Thomas have charged, Thomas' obscurity is employed as a purposeful device in communicating the experience of the poem, for the obscurity functions as a stylistic correlative between the experience of the poet seeking shape or form in the confusion of the universe and the experience of the reader seeking shape or meaning in the obscurity of the poem. This, of course, is not to say that the form of a poem must imitate the world it presents or that any poem seeking truth in a confused world must be obscure; rather it is to maintain that in this particular poem Thomas employs the obscurity functionally. For example, in Sonnet I Thomas' ambiguous references to Christianity confuse the reader; it is impossible to discover in this sonnet (without reading the other
sonnets) whether Thomas is supporting, rejecting, or ridiculing Christianity. Since the reader does not know what direction the poem will take, he is predisposed to reconsider the validity of traditional Christianity himself and as he reads on, searching for Thomas' conclusion about Christianity, he becomes just confused and curious enough to read the poem carefully and to be receptive to Thomas' rather unorthodox interpretation of Christianity. Furthermore, since Thomas' imagery remains obscure unless the reader realizes that the meaning is often conveyed as much by the emotional connotations of the individual words employed and by the effect of the sound patterns as by the actual literal allusive or symbolic meaning of the imagery, the reader (if he is to understand the poem at all) must employ his emotional and intuitive capacities as well as his intellectual talents in pursuing the meaning of the poem. Therefore, when Thomas employs emotional, intuitive, mythic thought rather than strictly logical reasoning in his final redefinition of Christianity, the reader finds little difficulty in accepting Thomas' conclusions since through the style of the poem Thomas has succeeded in forcing the reader to either see the world through Thomas' eyes and interpret it with his methods, or be completely mystified by the poem. Moreover, throughout the first seven sonnets the reader is forced by his confusion to think of the protagonist as poet, mankind and Christ. Although resulting in initial obscurity, the ambiguity concerning the identity of the protagonist prepares
the reader for the identity of all men fundamental to the redefinition of Christianity occurring in the final three sonnets. Thus, in the resolution of the poem the story of Christ is convincingly presented as a mythic representation of the story of mankind in which man is redeemed by the beauty of his suffering and his ability to understand and to love. The pattern of the universe is seen as beautiful when man's worth has been established.

*Altarwise by Owl-light* is an expression by a young poet of what is only a tentative solution to the problem of the meaning of life. Thomas originally desired to add to the poem, perhaps wishing to find a more satisfactory answer for mankind. Yet, that Thomas' resolution offers more consolation than salvation does not detract from the force of the quest or the beauty of the sonnets. The sonnets still speak movingly and honestly to a generation plagued with the same desire to believe as the young Thomas experienced. Perhaps Thomas had this in mind some years after the completion of the sonnets in his remark that *Altarwise by Owl-light* "would be of interest to another boily boy. Or a boily girl."126
Notes to Chapter Two


2 Ibid., p. 8.


4 Stearns, "Unsex the Skeleton...," p. 424.


6 *Loc. cit.*

7 Gertrude Jobes, *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols*, II (New York, 1961), p. 1222. In this context the owl has unpleasant connotations, for Athena in owl form is the counterpart of Annis who "in Brythonic lore...assumes the form of an owl and sucks the blood of children." (p. 100) Other relevant references to the owl include: "In Christian crucifixion scenes an attribute of Christ who sacrificed himself to give light to those in darkness" and "Buddhist foe of ignorance, lover of darkness and seclusion for meditation and reflection." (p. 1222)

8 Tindall, p. 128. Tindall explains "half-way" as halfway to life (in the womb) or half-way through life (half-way to death).

9 Kleinman, p. 15. Both Tindall (p. 129) and Kleinman explain that "Abaddon" is a reference to Apollyon from Revelation 9:10 who is referred to as "the destroyer" and an "Angel of the Bottomless Pit." Kleinman further explains that "Abaddon" literally means "place of perishing" and occurs in Job 26:6, 31:12, Psalms 88:12 and Proverbs 15:11, 27:20. To Thomas, Kleinman further asserts, Abaddon is the angel of death.

10 Ibid., p. 16. Kleinman suggests "hangnail" is, furthermore, a reference to the genealogy of Christ and a prediction that Christ (descendant of Adam) would hang nailed to a cross.

11 Tindall, p. 129. Tindall sees Thomas' use of the journalistic metaphor as important autobiographically since Thomas was once a newspaper reporter.

12 Treece, *Dylan Thomas*, pp. 149-150.


15Tindall, p. 129. "Thomas' mandrakes...probably from Donne, can mean children and genitals...Thomas, the young creative devil-dog-mandrake, is born. Since a son's birth is father's death, the young dog bites out the father's mandrake and reports the news."

16Kleinman, p. 20.

17Ibid., p. 21. "Since the cock is a symbol of virility, 'old cock from nowheres' is a pun, in street language, implying the inexplicable conception of Christ."

18Tindall, p. 129. Tindall suggests that "walking word" means Christ or Thomas as a poet.

19Kleinman, p. 22. Kleinman goes on to say that zodiacal signs are used metaphorically by Thomas to foretell the career of Christ.


22Tindall, p. 129. Sees "cock" as a weathercock and as Christ on the cross.

23Olson, p. 69. "He 'shares his bed with Capricorn and Cancer,' since these zones mark the limits of the sun's northward and southward motions in the course of a year."

24Tindall, p. 127.

25Olson, p. 87.

26Ibid., p. 69. Olson explains this clause as, "Anything is a metaphor for death, since death is the only reality, and therefore illustrated by all things."


28Olson, p. 69. Olson sees the image in a similar but somewhat more literal way. The universe "is a pelican feeding its celestial progeny, the stars, on its own substance."


30Tindall, p. 130. Sees "long stick" as phallic, as does Kleinman (p. 27).

31Kleinman, p. 27.
Tindall, p. 130. Tindall sees "long stick" and "shooting up" as producing the metaphor of the ladder of death, life and aspiration. However, he further sees the image as a frightened young child climbing up the stairs to bed.

Matthew 10:30.

Tindall, p. 131.


Kleinman, p. 31. "Hemlock" suggests both Socrates and Christ.

Olson, p. 70. Olson concludes with much the same concepts as those contained in this analysis of Sonnet II: "The course of the sun's life and of man's gives token only of death." However, he sees the literal import of the images as referring to the actual passage of the sun and movements of the stars. Therefore, although his analysis of Sonnet II and the one in this paper agree finally, they differ almost entirely on interpretations of individual images.

Ibid., p. 71.

Kleinman, p. 33.

Ibid., p. 34.

Loc. cit.

Tindall, p. 131. Tindall says a "wether" is usually castrated, but later in the sonnet he sees Thomas as a non-castrated ram leading the flock.

Olson, p. 71. Olson interprets the first section of the sonnet as an reanimation of the temptation of Eve in the Garden. This suggestion is certainly valid and complements the extremely clear imagery of birth, perhaps mythically the first birth, reminding the reader of the hope of Christianity. However, Olson further sees evidence of cuckoldry in the scene.

Kleinman, p. 37.

Tindall, p. 132. Tindall sees the "timeless cradle" as a womb, but interprets "descended bone" as death and sex, especially in connection with a young boy's sexual experience.

Thomas, *Collected Poetry*, "In the beginning," p. 27.

Tindall, p. 132.
Olson establishes that the presence of marrow, repeatedly in Thomas' poetry and prose, distinguishes live from dead bone.

Olson interprets the questions as metaphysical in nature but sees them as a "reducto ad absurdum" of traditional Christian dogma.

"The short spark's gender" according to Kleinman is a question about sex but is specifically a question about Christ's sex.

Olson interprets the "bamboo man" similarly. "Nevertheless, what of death, the marrowless skeleton, the 'bamboo man'? Shall these bones live, can the facts of the boneyard be brought together so as to answer these questions, and so make 'straight' a 'crooked boy,' a hunchback, a doubter?"

Kleinman interprets the image as cosmic editing but sees the editing as applying solely to the nativity and to Mary's response to her son's birth.
Gabriel has become Marshal Dylan of Dodge City but also "is a seraph angel of the Annunciation and the Last Trump, in charge, therefore, of birth, death and rebirth."

Olson emphasizes the reference to Christ as Jesu: "There is no reference as yet to the crucified Christ. We are, until Sonnet VII [sic.] in a world without the redemption of his crucifixion, and that world is a nightmare of Time and Death."

Tindall interprets "king of spots" as death but also as "father" and as "acne."

The "jacks" are the two thieves and the "queen" is Mary.

Ishmael, Hagar's son, in Genesis 21:8-21 and Ishmael, narrator of Melville's Moby Dick are the two Ishmael's.

"'Byzantine' may describe the gaunt, emaciated figures of Aramaean motif in the Byzantine iconography of the Eastern Church."

This line was salvaged by Thomas from Poem Seventeen of his 1933 Notebook (Lockwood Memorial Library, University of Buffalo, Buffalo, New York). In the original poem the line read, "For loss of blood I fell where stony hills/Had milk and honey flowing from their cracks."

Kleinman adds information establishing parallels between Melville's Ishmael and Jonah. "Ishmael, the narrator aboard the Pequod, and Jonah, the fugitive aboard the ship bound for Tarshish, encounter whales; both are cast into the sea and both are saved." The reference to Jonah is taken from Jonah 2:15.

"Snatched me by the hair" refers to Absalom.

Herman Melville, Moby Dick, ed. by Alfred Kazin (Boston, 1956) p. 156 footnote. "With reference to the Polar bear, it may possibly be urged by him who would fain go still deeper into this matter, that it is not the whiteness, separately regarded, which heightens the intolerable hideousness of that brute; for, analysed, that heightened hideousness, it might be said, only arises from the
circumstance, that the irresponsible ferociousness of the creature stands invested in the fleece of celestial innocence and love; and hence, by bringing together two such opposite emotions in our minds, the Polar bear frightens us with so unnatural a contrast. But even assuming all this to be true; yet, were it not for the whiteness, you would not have that intensified terror."

76 Kleinman, p. 68.
77 Ibid., p. 67.
79 Kleinman, p. 69.
80 The best example of Thomas' use of hair in conjunction with sexuality is the "Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait," Collected Poetry, p. 166-176.
81 Tindall, p. 136. Tindall suggests the bear quotes Virgil (Vergil) to warn young Aeneas of the sirens.
82 Ibid., p. 135. Tindall says the reference to "our lady" makes Mary in the manger another menacing mother on the "deadweed" (VI).
83 Kleinman, p. 74.
84 Ibid., p. 76. "The great miracle is wrought as the sea silence is burned on a wick of words. 'In the beginning was the word': and before the power of the word, which is here a lighted wick, the dead waters of primeval silence recede."
85 Loc. cit. "Pin-hilled nettle" is a description of the nettle fish, another name for the stinging jellyfish or medusa.
86 Ibid., p. 79.
87 Woodcock, p. 75.
88 There is a suggestion in "pluck out the stinging siren's eye" that the sexual creation of the world caused the medusa-siren's death as Perseus killed the mythological Medusa with the help of an eye.
89 Kleinman, p. 84. Kleinman gives the information that beeswax candles because of their purity came early to be regarded as symbolic of the flesh of Christ while "tallow" candles symbolized sinful man. He further explains the "wax's tower" as a phallic metaphor for God, but sees the birth suggested as specifically the birth of Christ.
"His [Thomas'] description of mating, surgery and birth in obstetrical imagery suggest a maternity hospital and operating room at the bottom of a Sargossa Sea, with a variety of jellyfish and sirens as nurses and midwives."

Kleinman sees the "written woods" as a manifestation of truth, specifically as Christ, "The Word." Thus, he sees the entire sonnet as a fight between Christ's truth and the song of time. He, as well as Olson (p. 78), interprets the sonnet in such a way that the poet is seen as rejecting "time's tune" for Christian faith.

"Bald pavilions" suggests heavenly mansions and "the house of bread" is a literal translation from the Hebrew of Bethlehem. Kleinman interprets this line as a specific reference to Christ who came from heaven and was born in Bethlehem. However, it could just as well be seen as a reference joining "bald pavilions," sounding vaguely formal and religious, with "the house of bread," or place of everyday concerns. If Thomas meant "heavenly mansions" and "Bethlehem," as Kleinman assumes, perhaps the line extends "time's tune" to apply to both heaven and earth.

And straightway one of them ran, and took a sponge, and filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave him to drink.

Christ on the cross is surrounded by two thieves ("three trees" and "tree of thieves") with Mary weeping at the foot of the cross. The nails are driven into his hands, and he is offered vinegar while repeated references to "thorns" and "pins" allude to the Crown of Thorns. Furthermore, the eclipse of the sun is suggested in line thirteen.

Kleinman comments on the image, "bent like three trees," as a "striking image of empathy," but he says there are "three trees" because there "are three Maries at the Crucifixion."

Tindall suggests male and female are joined here because Thomas accepts woman as necessary. "Woman may be terrible, but if you cannot beat her, join her."

"The poet, then, is Christ's fellow in death--hence the familiar 'Jack Christ'--and is crucified also."

Olson connects "minstrel angles" with minstrelsy and song in Sonnets IV, V, VI and VII.
The nails are "heaven-driven," "not in the sense of the divinely appointed, but of what is decreed by the stars, by the nature of the universe."

Kleinman, p. 98. "The 'snail-waked world' is slow to realize the meaning of the Christian axiom: the sum total of the four right angles of the cross is 360 degrees. The whole globe is contained in this sacrifice." Kleinman gives this argument in a Christian context. However, his explanation of the angle as incorporating 360 degrees once again demonstrates the emphasis on the circle as the shape of the universe seen through the sonnets.

Genesis 9:12-17.

Kleinman, p. 100.

"...'blowclock' is a mechanical conceit, a neologism for timebomb. Thomas may have invented, for this occasion, a device which does not measure time but explodes it." Kleinman further states that the image refers to the eclipse at the time of Christ's death and "...witnesses to his divinity.

Ibid., p. 106-107. Osiris myth described.


Kleinman, pp. 103-108. Kleinman firmly establishes Thomas' knowledge of Egyptian funeral customs, quoting profusely from poems by Thomas. Kleinman further suggests that Thomas' source was Budge (cited above).

Ibid., p. 113.

Olson, p. 80-81. "Apparently the meaning is that, in the rant and pretense of scholars such resurrection is restoration to life...but the mummy case is simply the glove of the hand of time." "What is resurrected is nothing but the 'unwound mummy.'"

Kleinman, p. 115. "The mask is an example of Thomas' ability to produce multiple effects with one image....The mask may suggest a staged drama...masks which archaeological excavators wear as dust filters" or a "surgical" mask.

Ibid. cit.

Ibid., p. 116. "The long Odyssey beyond the rivers [to the land of resurrection] is beset by many hazards; therefore the dead god asks that amulets be hung around his neck to make certain his arrival in Tuat, or other world."
Alluding to his hope of "the bread-sided field" in Sonnet IV, the reference to stones suggests Luke 11:11-12: "What father among you, if his son asks for a loaf, will instead of a loaf give him a stone...If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?" Thomas, asking for hope of resurrection finds only the stone of death and is weighed down by it.

Kleinman, p. 116. Kleinman notices the pun but sees it only as an indication of the weariness of the protagonist.

Tindall, p. 142.

Loc. cit. Thomas rejects the "dummy" or fake harbour promised to him as a child in Sunday school in favor of his poetry.

Kleinman, p. 124. Kleinman suggests that the fish, as a traditional symbol for Christ, brings salvation. The faint connotation of Christ in the fish reference, however, to my thinking only adds to the mythic context of Christ as symbolic of everyman.

Ibid., p. 125. "The foam-blue channel recalls the birth of Venus from the foam of the sea." Kleinman, however, interprets the passage as a testament of the triumph of Paul's message over the Venus cult in Rome.

Ibid., p. 126-127. Kleinman contributes all the information about the rubarb, but he interprets the rubarb as symbolizing Paul.

Tindall, p. 143.

Loc. cit. "His building worm is Eve's destructive serpent, 'the rude, red' phallus, equally creative and destructive."

Kleinman, p. 129. The "rude red tree" is the cross. The lines pray that out of Christ's death "the covenant will be redeemed, the promised fulfilled, innocence restored, death banished."

Ibid., p. 128.

Although it is certainly helpful to read Tindall, Olson and Kleinman.

Throughout the discussion of *Altarwise* by *Owl-light* as the poetic portrayal of the poet's quest for shape, the question of Thomas' obscurity has been rather fleetingly considered. Since Thomas' much defamed and also much defended obscurity has been a central issue in Thomas criticism for some time, it would be repetitive and perhaps presumptuous to attempt a definitive discussion in this paper arguing that Thomas' obscurity is either a defect or an asset in his poetry in general. Yet, the technique and concerns demonstrated in the sonnets do provide some limited insight into the obscurity characteristic of most of Thomas' poetry. As has been indicated briefly in Chapters I and II, the obscurity and ambiguity of Thomas' technique contributes to the experience of the poem if the reader is successful in overcoming the technical difficulties and, therefore, in understanding the poem. The technique is appropriate to (although not necessitated by) the subject of the sonnets since the obscurity psychologically prepares the reader for Thomas' mythic vision of the shape of the universe. This, however, does not necessarily mean that the same principle extends to Thomas' other poetry; yet, since the *Altarwise* sonnets are quite similar in theme to other early poems by Thomas and since they provide an extreme instance of the obscurity characteristic of not only Thomas' early poetry but also to some extent his poetry of every period, some conclusions about the sonnets should logically extend to his
other verse. Therefore, the following chapter will attempt to briefly outline some concepts crucial to Thomas' technique in the sonnets which are characteristic of his work as a whole, examining his obscurity as primarily a product of his mythic conception of the world and of the nature of his art. This chapter will not (nor is it intended to) completely explain or critically evaluate Thomas' philosophy or technique; the discussion is merely presented to suggest very briefly the role of mythic thought in Thomas' poetry and poetic theory and the relationship of the poet's mythic vision to the resulting ambiguity and obscurity characteristic of Thomas' continuing quest for shape.

The similarity of Thomas' poetic theory to mythic thought and its relationship to his quest for shape is clearly evident in the poet's explanation of his craft when juxtaposed against statements made by authorities on mythic thought. Defining art and the artist in An Essay on Man, Ernst Cassirer wrote: "The poet and the maker of myth seem, indeed, to live in the same world."¹ Elaborating on this statement, Cassirer further explained that art is someone's concrete, formed expression of his individual cognition of the form underlying some phase of life. "Science gives us order in thoughts; morality gives us order in actions; art gives us order in the apprehension of visible, tangible, and audible appearances."² Regardless of the validity of Cassirer's definition, it is plain that his conception of the artist and that of Dylan Thomas were similar. For example, in Quite
Early One Morning Thomas wrote:

Poetry is the rhythmic, inevitably narrative, movement from an overclothed blindness to a naked vision that depends in its intensity on the strength of the labour put into the creation of the poetry. My poetry is, or should be, useful to me for one reason: it is the record of my individual struggle, from darkness towards some measure of light, and what of the individual struggle is still to come benefits by the sight and knowledge of the faults and fewer merits in that concrete record. My poetry is, or should be, useful to others for its individual recording of that same struggle with which they are necessarily acquainted.

Writing in the same vein in an essay entitled "On Poetry," Thomas further explained, "A good poem helps to change the shape and significance of the universe, helps to extend everyone's knowledge of himself and the world around him." By his own definition, then, Thomas was a mystic philosophical poet, seeking the "naked vision" that could reveal the form, shape, or meaning of life. Significantly, Thomas spoke of the more concrete term "shape," rather than Cassirer's abstract "form"; yet, fundamentally, they both said much the same thing. Therefore, the search for "shape" central to the Alterwise sonnets, far from being an incidental concern in Thomas' career as a poet, is by his own definition one characteristic of his technique and his poetic impulse.

Dylan Thomas' quest for shape, moreover, confirmed Cassirer's dictum (at least as far as one can view Thomas as a typical poet) that "the poet and the maker of myth seem, indeed, to live in the same world," since much of Thomas' technique and subject matter can be linked to his mythic vision. Explaining the mythic consciousness, Cassirer
wrote:

The real substratum of myth is not a substratum of thought but of feeling. Myth and primitive religion are by no means entirely incoherent, they are not bereft of sense or reason. But their coherence depends much more upon unity of feeling than upon logical rules....The boundaries between the kingdoms of plants, of animals, of man—the differences between species, families, genera—are fundamental and ineffaceable. But the primitive mind ignores and rejects them all. Its view of life is a synthetic, not an analytic one. Life is not divided into classes and subclasses. It is felt as an unbroken continuous whole which does not admit of any clean-cut and trenchant distinctions. The limits between the different spheres are not insurmountable barriers; they are fluent and fluctuating. There is no specific difference between the various realms of life. Nothing has a definite, invariable, static shape. By a sudden metamorphosis everything may be turned into everything. If there is any characteristic and outstanding feature of the mythical world, any law by which it is governed—it is the law of metamorphosis.6

That the "real substratum" of Thomas' art is not thought but feeling is rather generally agreed upon by critics; yet, what is happening in lines such as the following causes wide-spread disagreement.

Child of the short spark in the shapeless country
Soon sets alight a long stick from the cradle;
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.

Although these lines can be spoken of as examples of Thomas' "cinematic technique," something very different from the cinematic technique employed by Eliot or Auden is involved. Here the equivalent of the primitive unity of matter reflects itself in the metamorphosis of one image into another, connected not by logic but by a "unity of feeling," and, for
Thomas' reader, to realize this is to go a long way toward understanding Thomas' obscure passages. Moreover, that the metamorphosis of imagery in Thomas' poetry was no accident but was a reflection of his mythic view, is further revealed in Thomas' statement recalled by Lady Snow that "he might think through the medium of rain, as he then thought through the medium of cells."\

Equally as important to Thomas' technique is his belief in the shape of time as a cyclical unity. Similarly, in the mythic mind, "we find the same principle—that of the solidarity and the unbroken unity of life—if we pass from space to time." Since mythic time is a unity, it "is felt to be cyclical, and therefore, in a way, recurrent...Past, present, and future coalesce..." Remarking on Thomas' peculiar view of time in a passage reminiscent of Cassirer's comments concerning mythic thought, Jacob Korb wrote, "To the perfect mystic, time is neither an irresistibly passing stream nor a rigidly ordered and irreversible sequence; it is an eternal present....In Thomas' view, the embryo is already the child, the man, and the corpse; the corpse, in turn, is the decomposed elements which will feed the plants and so be returned to the cycle of life and death." That Korb is correct is apparent when one examines the sonnets. In Sonnet I Thomas introduced with the birth of the protagonist his subsequent death and linked them irrevocably together. Moreover, death and birth are seen as simultaneous events; Biblical events and the poet's life are portrayed as occupying
the same space at the same time; and even the limited peace that the poet finds at the end of the poem is simply his mythic vision of the circular unity of all time and all beings.\textsuperscript{11}

An understanding of Thomas' essentially mythic vision of reality, then, explains the subject matter of his early poetry (the concrete expression of his vision of the shape of the universe as a fundamental unity) and also explains much of the obscurity of his technique resulting from his sympathetic view of nature in which objects and events flow freely into one another and in which metamorphosis is the law. Thomas' mythic view, moreover, explains to some extent Thomas' recurring sexual imagery. It is not as Stuart Holroyd suggested that "sex...was Dylan Thomas's god";\textsuperscript{12} rather, in Thomas' sympathetic view of nature, the identification between man and nature is seen as so complete that the whole universe shares the attributes of man, his life, death and sexuality. Therefore, as in Sonnet VI, even the creation of the world can be spoken of in sexual terms. Thomas' mythic view, too, partially explains his preoccupation with death. As Cassirer demonstrated, "The feeling [in mythic thought] of the indestructible unity of life is so strong and unshakable as to deny and to defy the fact of death."\textsuperscript{13} Therefore, much of ancient mythology is concerned with explaining the origin of death because death was not looked upon as inevitable but as some strange accident unrelated to the world as men believed it to be. Thomas, then, a modern man whose rational awareness of death was profound,
sought to reconcile the fact of death with his mythic view of matter and time as an indestructible unity. Invariable, therefore, he seldom portrayed death as non-being but rather as a blending into the unity of the cosmos (the cyclical process). Although the physical absorption at death of the individual into the cycle is a rational scientific fact, Thomas extended the physical fact to support a spiritual hope. As is characteristic of mythic thought, man's spirit is assumed to be indestructible. Thus, since the body is not destroyed but merely becomes part of the cosmos, so too, the spirit does not really die, although neither Thomas nor primitive mythic thinkers seem to have evolved any definite scheme explaining the immortality of the spirit; rather the belief is based upon faith and upon the personal inability to comprehend death as final (see "In the White Giant's Thigh," pp. 197-199, Collected Poetry). Therefore, Thomas' nonrational conception necessitated a nonlogical mythic presentation of death in which the primitive faith in the unity of life overrode a more scientific skepticism. Since his faith lacked the assurance of any expressly religious basis and because his ideas concerning the change inherent in death lacked concrete outline, logic was seldom admitted into the method of his obscure mythic imagery in passages dealing with death, and when it was, skepticism triumphed over his faith (as in Sonnet IX).

Less obvious, yet still quite relevant to Thomas' poetic technique, is the relationship between mythic conceptions
of language and Thomas' concern with "the word." Quoting Mrs. Sullivan's (Helen Keller's teacher's) account of Miss Keller's rapture as she first began to realize the significance of words, that "everything [has]...a name," Cassirer commented that "primitive man must have felt the same way, as a "new horizon...[was] opened up...[when man] learned the use of the new instrument of thought." Thomas, the modern mythic man, also felt this elation at the power of words. When he was a child, he said, language did not seem to refer to the real world but to new realities: "And those words were, to me, as the notes of bells, the sounds of musical instruments, the voices of the wind, sea and rain, the rattle of milk carts, the clopping of hooves on cobbles, the fingering of branches on a window pane, might be to someone deaf from birth, who had miraculously found his hearing." Later when he decided to become a writer, Thomas' love of words was still primary: "The first thing," Thomas wrote, "was to feel and know their sound and substance; what I was going to do with those words, what I was going to say through them would come later." Based on his faith in the solidarity of life, primitive man believed that the world could hear and understand. Thus, as Cassirer explained, "Hence if the powers of nature are called upon in the right way they cannot refuse their aid. Nothing can resist the magic word." Although Thomas probably meant his statement in a much less literal manner than would Cassirer's primitive man, he expressed a similar belief to
to Lady Snow. As she recalled, "Man, Thomas claimed, tells the sun to stop and tells the sun to go on." Furthermore, one of the recurring features of Thomas' imagery, as observed by Elder Olson, is his merging of tenor and vehicle, a stylistic device which resembles a characteristic of language described by Cassirer as a consequence of the obsessive nature of mythic thought: "The potential between 'symbol' and 'meaning' is resolved; in place of a more or less adequate 'expression,' we find a relation of identity or complete congruence between 'image' and object,' between the name and the thing." Similarly, Jacob Korg described the "merging of tenor and vehicle" characteristic of Thomas' imagery. To use Korg's example, "In the line... 'One bough of bone across the rooting air,' it is impossible to tell whether the metaphor begins with 'bough' or 'bone.'" When Thomas asked for a "literal" interpretation of his verse, it is clear that he wished that the symbolic function of his imagery not be considered apart from the image itself; he intended a complete union and identity between the meaning of the symbolic function and the object so that when he explained the "dog among the fairies" in Sonnet I as a real "world-devouring ghost-creature," he was demanding an appreciation of the concrete reality of his imagery, recognizing no symbolic meaning apart from the literal. Yet, this is not to say that he acknowledged no symbolic meaning, but only to emphasize that as a mythic thinker he did not distinguish referential or symbolic meaning from the literal
image. And although Thomas was not unique in this concern, failure by critics to recognize his emphasis has led to some misunderstanding of his poetry.

More important, however, to Thomas' poetic technique, is the ancient belief in "the word" as the Logos, "the principle of the universe and the first principle of human knowledge." That Thomas was capable of envisioning language as a universal system having an actual existence outside the mind of man is demonstrated in Thomas' early poem, "In the Beginning," in which language is seen as the fundamental principle of the universe.

In the beginning was the word, the word
That from the solid bases of the light
Abstracted all the letters of the void;
And from the cloudy bases of the breath
The word flowed up, translating to the heart
First characters of birth and death.

Although in the above lines (as in Sonnet VI) Thomas alluded to the Biblical "In the beginning was the Word," it is clear that what Thomas had in mind was not "word" as a metaphor for Christ but "word" as a vision of language that is a viable force in itself. As William T. Moynihan observed concerning these lines, "Life is equated with light and thus the beginning of language in life is manifested in the sounds and in the shapes of words." With regard to language, two concepts are evident in this passage. First, the "word" is thought of as a "thing," abstract but still having an identity beyond its mere referential function. Second, expressed more clearly in the lines from "From Love's First Fever to Her Plague,"
And from the first declension of the flesh
I learnt man's tongue, to twist the shapes of thoughts
Into the stony idiom of the brain,
To shade and knit anew the patch of words.27

man is seen as a slave, bound by the restrictions of words.28

Not only is he restricted in what he can express through
the medium of words, but he is also restricted in his very
thinking by the logical syntactic system of language—as
long as he is thinking rationally rather than mythically.
Thus, much of Thomas's ambiguity was the result of his attempt¬
ing to transcend the limits of language in order to express
the inexpressible, and, therefore, he sometimes broke with
the laws of logical syntax in order to express a-logical
mythic concepts.

It is this quality of Thomas's poetry that led John
Bayley in The Romantic Survival to link Dylan Thomas's poetic
 technique with that of the surrealists.

In surrealist poetry...each word is at war with
its neighbour, and syntax is systematically dis¬
located in the effort to make language a thing,
a structure, on its own........................
The poetry of Dylan Thomas has obviously much
in common with...the word expedients of convention¬
al surrealism....Words, single words, are far more
important in Thomas's poetry than in that of Yeats
or Auden....The norm of both Yeats's and Auden's
poetry is fluency, conversation: the norm of
Thomas's is incantation, the single word as thing,
dropped on the page."28

Much of the obscurity of Thomas's style, then, results from
the lack of logical syntax and, moreover, from the burden
of meaning that is placed upon the individual word. There¬
fore, each word may imply several differing meanings (most
obvious in Thomas's love of puns) as well as differing emotional
connotations, and Thomas’ dislocated syntax forces the reader to stop at each word, savoring the multiplicity of meaning to be found there. If, however, one is searching for normal logical syntax and a coherent narrative development, this technique can seem to result in unnecessary and bewildering obscurity and ambiguity.

Implicit in the discussion of Thomas’ emphasis on the word has been a distinction between the verbal obscurity necessitated by Thomas’ mythic vision of the shape of the universe and the ambiguity which resulted from his talent for compression, for although Thomas’ thought did have distinct similarities with the thought of the primitive, mythic mind, he was also a very sophisticated modern poet. Moreover, to refer to Thomas as a mythic thinker is not to suggest that he was an ignorant primitive savage. He was, rather, a modern mystic, whose mysticism is best defined by demonstrating certain parallels to mythic thought. And, although a discussion of Thomas’ mythic vision can never totally explain or define Thomas’ poetry, an understanding of mythic thought certainly contributes to the understanding of much of what is difficult and obscure in his work. As other poets attempt to “create” a modern mythology, Thomas expresses timeless mythic concepts. It is conceivably true, too, that his mythic mysticism functions as a direct link between the consciousness of Thomas and the subconscious of his public; that most people seem to love and understand Thomas emotionally even before they understand his verse rationally may suggest that Thomas
expressed ideas that even today are natural to man, even if consciously they have been replaced by more rational scientific concepts and, furthermore, that his poetry expresses truths which have emotional, if not scientific, validity. Conceivably, moreover, critics who maintain that Thomas' poetry has little or no meaning might understand his meaning if they did not insist upon his expressing logical ideas in a systematic way. Those who criticize Thomas for his obscurity should realize that his peculiar non-logical use of words and imagery is necessary to force the reader out of the rational approach to poetry—habitual to modern man, leaving the reader's mind receptive to more emotional mythic communication. The reader, thus, must view the world in the way Thomas wishes him to perceive it (mythically) and, consequently, experience Thomas' world or he will be baffled or repulsed by Thomas' obscurity.

In any event, Thomas' obscurity resulted partly from his emotional, mythic consciousness and his mythic vision of the shape of the universe and partly from more purely technical considerations as, for example, the extreme concision of his verse and the burden he placed on the individual suggestivity of each word and image and occasionally his use of words and phrases for their sound value. As Bayley explained in discussion the lines, "Forged in man's minerals, the brassy orator.../My Egypt's armour buckling in its sheet,/I scrape through resin to a starry bone/And a blood parhelion."

Brassy as applied to orator is clear enough, but what is its relation to blood, and why starry bone? Language here seems to have left the
referential for the absolute pole; sign has become thing, and such faint referential echoes as we can catch are necessarily uncertain, and do not lead us with any inevitability. A parhelion we find, on consulting a dictionary, is 'a spot on the solar halo in which the light is intensified...a mock sun.' We look in vain here for any metaphysical clue; Thomas does not appear to use the word as a meaningful illustration, like Donne's intelligence and spheres, but for its sound, and its exotic unfamiliarity.

Each of these types of obscurity is evident in Altar-wise by Owl-light and helps to explain the complexity of the poem. Furthermore, as Thomas asserted and his notebooks make clear, he was a disciplined craftsman who worked diligently on his poems. Each line has been carefully written and rewritten, and each line is intended to "mean as well as be" although the truths expressed in his poetry are mythic truths and as such are couched in an appropriate form and style. Therefore, armed with an understanding of the reasons that Thomas' verse seems obscure, it is possible to discover the meaning of even his most difficult poetry, even as it is possible to understand his sonnets.

Moreover, although the emphasis of this discussion has been on Thomas' early obscure poetry, even the relatively straightforward poetry of Thomas' later period demonstrates Thomas' continuing mythic vision of the shape of the universe and the accompanying mythic technique. Almost every critic writing about Thomas' poetry has observed, "modulations in poetic technique and changes in subject matter rendered the poems he [Thomas] wrote after The Map of Love far more accessible" than his early poetry. Never again would Thomas
write as obscure a poem as *Altarwise by Owl-light*. The change in Thomas' style is explained in various ways. Elder Olson suggested that as Thomas found God he moved from a "dark" phase occupied with private enigmas to a period of "faith and love." G. S. Fraser postulated that "in many of his early poems, Thomas...seems immersed...in an attempt to grasp the whole of life, human and natural, as an apparently confused but ultimately single process. In his later poems, he more often seems to be quite consciously and much less bewilderingly, celebrating the process—celebrating it, as Dr. Daiches says, religiously, and with sacramental imagery." And Jacob Korg explained Thomas' new clarity as resulting from an abatement of his mythic consciousness: "But as Thomas became concerned with external experiences and with the problem of communication, the mythic consciousness, gradually retreated into the background, so that in the later poems ultimate realities are approached through nature and daily life instead of visionary imagination." 

As the diversity of critical explanation suggests, the change in Thomas' style was the consequence of many influences. As he became a more practiced and conscious poet, Thomas dispensed with some obscurity in the interest of clarity. Furthermore, he seems to have become less concise, concerning himself more with communication than compression and suggestivity, but however much he and his poetry changed, there remained an ambiguity endemic to each of his religious statements (his attempts to discover and further describe the shape and
meaning of the world). For example, the concluding affirmation of *Vision and Prayer* is in its way as ambiguous and obscure as the closing of Sonnet X although the language is simple and syntactically straightforward.

I turn the corner of prayer and burn
In a blessing of the sudden
Sun. In the name of the damned
I would turn back and run
To the hidden land
But the loud sun
Christens down
The sky.
I
Am found,
O let him
Scald me and drown
Me in his world's wound.
His lightning answers my
Cry. My voice burns in his hand.
Now I am lost in the blinding
One. The sun roars at the prayer's end.35

This concluding prayer, like the concluding prayer of Sonnet X has been interpreted both as an orthodox Christian affirmation ("Sun" is seen as a pun on "Son" with the reference reinforced by Thomas' use of "Christens") and as a pantheistic prayer. Whichever interpretation one accepts, however, it is clear that the nature of Thomas' faith changed little after the sonnets. The world is still seen as a "wound" and the poet identifies himself with a figure represented by both Christ and the sun. Since there is no indication that Thomas ever became a Christian and much evidence to substantiate Lady Snow's remembrance that Thomas "cared nothing for Christ in a theological sense...but cared very much for Christ as a symbol,"36 it seems most rational to assume that the ambiguity of the passage is a product of Thomas' continuing
and rather vague mythic search for shape. At the end of his life as at its beginning, Thomas affirmed the beauty of the cycle of life, symbolically represented both by the sun and by Christ.

The clarity of Thomas' expression increased as his assurance grew, yet the fundamental ambiguity remained since his sympathetic belief in the mythic unity of all things could afford him no rational system which could be logically and clearly articulated. Certain of his belief in a "Heaven that never was/Nor will be ever is always true,"^37 and writing poems in praise of a God whom he could not rationally accept, Thomas succeeded in writing some of the most beautiful and most ambiguous religious poems in the language. The ambiguity of the poetry, moreover, yields much of the beauty as in the following lines from "Poem on his Birthday":

That the closer I move
To death, one man through his sundered hulks,
The louder the sun blooms
And the tusked, ramshackling sea exults;
And every wave of the way
And gale I tackle, the whole world then
With more triumphant faith
Than ever was since the world was said,
Spins its morning of praise,

I hear the bouncing hills
Grow larked and greener at berry brown
Fall and the dew larks sing
Taller this thunderclap spring, and how
More spanned with angels ride
The mansouled firey islands! Oh,
Holler then their eyes,
And my shining men no more alone
As I sail out to die.^38

The power of these lines is not diminished by the
absence of any clear articulation of what Thomas believed to happen when he "sail[ed] out to die." The beauty results from the quality of his mythic faith in life, a faith so great that it overcomes any thought of death, and death is seen, once again, as a mere change of estate—a blending into the beauty of the process. Thomas, as a mythic thinker, believed in the unity of life and the beauty of process as the shape of the universe even more strongly in his later poetry than he did in *Altarwise by Owl-light*. Thus, as the sonnets epitomize the technical obscurity and ambiguity of Thomas' early poetry, they further suggest the continuing ambiguity and obscurity characteristic of the poetic presentation of his vision of the shape and meaning of reality at every period of his life.
Notes to Chapter Three


2Ibid., pp. 135-170. The quotation is taken from page 168.

3Thomas, Quite Early One Morning (New York, 1960), p. 188.

4Ibid., p. 192.

5Cassirer, p. 153.

6Ibid., p. 81.

7Moynihan, The Craft and Art of Dylan Thomas, p. 36. Recalled to Mr. Moynihan by Lady Snow.

8Cassirer, p. 87.


10Korg, Dylan Thomas, p. 32.


13Cassirer, p. 83.


15Cassirer, p. 35.

16Thomas, "Poetic Manifesto: A Manuscript," Texas Quarterly, IV (1961), 44-53. Thomas' manuscript is photographically reproduced. The quotation comes from page 2 of the manuscript.

17Ibid., page 3 of the manuscript.

18Cassirer, p. 110.

19Moynihan, p. 35. Recalled by Lady Snow.


22Korg, p. 40.

23Treece, Dylan Thomas, pp. 149.

24Cassirer, Essay on Man, p. 111.

25Thomas, Collected Poetry, p. 27.

26Moynihan, p. 55.

27Thomas, Collected Poetry, p. 25.

28Moynihan, p. 56. "Like Merlin, the word magician is found in his tree-prison, in his flesh-tower, he who would make all the world meaningful in words." Moynihan's statement is similar although not synonymous with the ideas expressed in this paper concerning Thomas' awareness of the restrictions of words.


31Korg, p. 28.

32Olson, p. 20.

33Fraser, Casebook, p. 39.

34Korg, p. 29. Korg agrees, however, that Thomas never entirely leaves his mythic vision behind.

35Thomas, Collected Poetry, p. 165.

36Moynihan, p. 38. Recalled by Lady Snow.

37Thomas, Collected Poetry, p. 191.

38Ibid., p. 193.
List of Works Consulted


______. "Thomas' Sonnet I," *Explicator,* XIV (December 1955), 16.


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I

Altarwise by owl-light in the half-way house
The gentleman lay graveward with his furies;
Abaddon in the hangnail cracked from Adam,
And, from his fork, a dog among the fairies,
The atlas-eater with a jaw for news,
Bit out the mandrake with to-morrow's scream.
Then, penny-eyed, that gentleman of wounds,
Old cock from nowheres and the heaven's egg,
With bones unbuttoned to the half-way winds,
Hatched from the windy salvage on one leg,
Scraped at my cradle in a walking word
That night of time under the Christward shelter:
I am the long world's gentleman, he said,
And share my bed with Capricorn and Cancer.

II

Death is all metaphors, shape in one history
The child that sucketh long is shooting up,
The planet-ducted pelican of circles
Weans on an artery the gender's strip;
Child of the short spark in a shapeless country
Soon sets alight a long stick from the cradle;
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.
Hairs of your head, then said the hollow agent,
Are but the roots of nettles and of feathers
Over these groundworks thrusting through a pavement
And hemlock-headed in the wood of weathers.

III

First there was the lamb on knocking knees
And three dead seasons on a climbing grave
That Adam's wether in the flock of horns,
Butt of the tree-tailed worm that mounted Eve,
Horned down with skullfoot and the skull of toes
On thunderous pavements in the garden time;
Rip of the vaults, I took my marrow-ladle
Out of the wrinkled undertaker's van,
And, Rip Van Winkle from a timeless cradle,
Dipped me breast-deep in the descended bone;
The black ram, shuffling of the year, old winter,
Alone alive among his mutton fold,
We rung our weathering changes on the ladder,
Said the antipodes, and twice spring chimed.

IV

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?
(My shape of age nagging the wounded whisper).
Which sixth of wind blew out the burning gentry?
(Questions are hunchbacks to the poker marrow).
What of a bamboo man among your acres?
Corset the boneyards for a crooked boy?
Button your bodice on a hump of splinters,
My camel's eyes will needle through the shroud.
Love's reflection of the mushroom features,
Stills snapped by night in the bread-sided field,
Once close-up smiling in the wall of pictures,
Arc-lamped thrown back upon the cutting flood.

V

And from the windy West came two-gunned Gabriel,
From Jesu's sleeve trumped up the king of spots,
The sheath-decked jacks, queen with a shuffled heart;
Said the fake gentleman in suit of spades,
Black-tongued and tipsy from salvation's bottle.
Rose my Byzantine Adam in the night.
For loss of blood I fell on Ishmael's plain,
Under the milky mushrooms slew my hunger,
A climbing sea from Asia had me down
And Jonah's Moby snatched me by the hair,
Cross-stroked salt Adam to the frozed 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.

VI

Cartoon of slashes on the tide-traced crater,
He in a book of water tallow-eyed
By lava's light split through the oyster vowels
And burned sea silence on a wick of words.
Pluck, cock, my sea eye, said medusa's scripture,
Lop, love, my fork tongue, said the pin-hilled nettle;
And love plucked out the stinging siren's eye,
Old cock from nowheres lopped the minstrel tongue
Till tallow I blew from the wax's tower
The fats of midnight when the salt was singing;
Adam, time's joker, on a witch of cardboard
Spelt out the seven seas, an evil index,
The bagpipe-breasted ladies in the deadweed
Blew out the blood gauze through the wound of manwax.

VII

Now stamp the Lord's Prayer on a grain of rice,
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.
Doom on deniers at the wind-turned statement.
Time's tune my ladies with the teats of music,
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,
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.

VIII

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.
This was the sky, Jack Christ, each minstrel angle
Drove in the heaven-driven of the nails
Till the three-coloured rainbow from my nipples
From pole to pole leapt round the snail-waked world.
I by the tree of thieves, all glory's sawbones,
Unsex the skeleton this mountain minute,
And by this blowclock witness of the sun
Suffer the heaven's children through my heartbeat.

IX

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

X

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' eyes
Spot the blown word, and on the seas I image
December's thorn screwed in a brow of holly.
Let the first Peter from a rainbow's quayrail
Ask the tall fish swept from the bible east,
What rhubarb man peeled in her foam-blue channel
Has sown a flying garden round that sea-ghost?
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.