

WAR AND DEATH IN DYLAN THOMAS'S POEM "CEREMONY AFTER A FIRE RAID"

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The poem "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" deals with the death of another person, a new-born baby in an air raid. The poem was written in 1945 and published in Thomas's *Deaths and Entrances* in 1946. The subject of the poem is the innocent infant dead in war, completely burned in the arms of its mother. What is brought into question is the significance, the meaning of this death. Although death is essentially a complex phenomenon without explanation, without sense and meaning, the poet tries to shed light upon this reality, attempting to draw meaning from the absurdity of death.

The essence of this poem lies in the hope of overcoming death and all the destructive elements of life (Daiches 17). The other person in this poem is not a relative, but an unknown child victimized by the violence of war, not a soldier but a civilian, not an adult but a child. The poem, as the title suggests and the sermon style language confirms, is in itself a funeral ceremony harmonized by an increasing music (Watkins 114).

The poem is divided into three parts, each part having a different structure: the first part contains a cry of grief and a confessional prayer, the second part explains the significance of this death, and the third part culminates in a great symphonic chant of glory and exultation. The poem starts with a lament, a cry of grief:

I

Myselfes
The grievers
Grieve
Among the street burned to tireless death
A child of a few hours
With its kneading mouth
Charred on the black breast of the grave
The mother dug, and its arms full of fires.

Begin
With singing
Sing
Darkness kindled back into beginning
When the caught tongue nodded blind.
A star was broken
Into the centuries of the child
Myselfes grieve now, and miracles cannot atone.

Forgive
Us forgive
Give
Us your death that myselfes the believers
May hold it in a great flood
Till the blood shall spurt,
And the dust shall sing like a bird
As the grains blow, as your death grows, through our heart.

Crying
Your dying
Cry,
Child beyond cockcrow, by the fire-dwarfed
Street we chant the flying sea
In the body bereft.
Love is the last light spoken. Oh
Seed of sons in the loin of the black husk left.

II

I know not whether
Adam or Eve, the adorned holy bullock
Or the white ewe lamb
Or the chosen virgin
Laid in her snow
On the altar of London,
Was the first to die
In the cinder of the little skull,
O bride and bride groom
O Adam and Eve together
Lying in the lull
Under the sad breast of the head stone
White as the skeleton
Of the garden of Eden.

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

III

Into the organpipes and steeples
Of the luminous cathedrals,
Into the weathercocks' molten mouths
Rippling in twelve-winded circles,
Into the dead clock burning the hour
Over the urn of sabbaths
Over the whirling ditch of daybreak
Over the sun's hovel and the slum of fire
And the golden pavements laid in requiems,
Into the cauldrons of the statuary,
Into the bread in a wheatfield of flames,
Into the wine burning like brandy,

The masses of the sea
The masses of the sea under
The masses of the infant-bearing sea
Erupt, fountain, and enter to utter for ever
Glory glory glory
The sundering ultimate kingdom of genesis' thunder.

The first person plural is surprising and indicates that this death is lamented by the whole race. In the first line “Myselfes” represents what is usually called human kind. This expression indicates, according to Siew-yue Killingsley, that the poet becomes part of this choir of griever, a reminiscence of a line from Hopkins’ *Henry Purcell* (296). However these “grieveres” are, at least temporarily, stripped despoiled of their individuality and hidden behind this generalized “grieveres”, this collectivity.

The first stanza presents a declaration of grief and links birth and death in the same tragic movement. This death is anonymous, “among the street” (I.1.4),¹ the child is given no name in the poem. Just a few hours after the birth, the child encounters death. In line 7 the mother is there, but instead of a womb and milk, the child finds the “black breast of the grave”. In the second stanza, the requiem begins with a sad song singing that darkness put out—“kindled back” (I.2.4)—the light of that birth. The violence of that death disturbs one’s senses and makes the “kneading mouth” (I.1.6) which wanted milk and mother find the grave and the “tongue nodded blind” (I.2.5). With an allusion to the star that shone in the sky on the night of Jesus Christ’s nativity, according to the narratives of the Gospel, the poet sadly states in the second stanza that a “star was broken” and there is no chance of a miracle to save the misfortune disgrace of this child’s death. The star is broken, hope is broken, the child is broken. The star, much more than the flash of the exploding bomb, represents the broken hope of salvation, the dis-nativity of this anti-gospel where birth finds death so near and the individual is dead among burned, unnamed streets.

As the poem develops, the religious experience and symbolism become more and more evident. The grieveres are now called “the believers” (I.3.4), grieving becomes a confession of guilt. In the third stanza the poet calls for forgiveness, forgiveness for “us” (I.3.2-4), for all humanity. The poet assumes more and more the function of a priest, interceding for the rest of the community, presiding at a Mass of which the confession of guilt is a fundamental part. This death is endowed with a sacrificial significance when the “believers” ask for it, take and “hold it” (I.3.5), and let child’s blood spill over “through [our] heart” (I.3.8). It is a symbol of the renewal of life since the dust sings like a bird and the “grains blow” (I.3.7-8). This death also gives the poet the opportunity to develop the theme of guilt for the murder of so a young child, such a fragile life, guilt also for all the deaths in war, guilt which the Christian tradition links with the sin of Adam and Eve, so profoundly enclosed in human nature.

This death as a sacrificial act has a positive energy in itself. This death can occur for the sake of the believers, it can make blood spurt, dust sing, and grains blow “in nature’s mystical unity” (Ackerman 108). The poet continues in the fourth stanza directing the chant of the “congregation” of all human kind in the crying of the child’s “dying cry” (I.4.2,3), in the chant of the “flying sea” (I.4.5), the sea of the dead, the flight of the soul. The image of the sea seems to allude to the book of Genesis, to the narrative of the creation of the world, where the sea surrounds everything, and to the book of Revelation where the sea also surrounds everything. The redemptive character of this death can be seen in the background of the Christian tradition, which absorbed the Old Testament idea of the holocaust, and in the New Testament proclamation of a Redeemer who gives his life for the salvation of the others. But the poem cannot be simply identified with some sort of Christian orthodoxy, because the poet uses the Christian tradition recreating the meanings and applying them to the tragic death of the child and to the forces and elements of nature. Notwithstanding that, Aneirin Talfan Davies regards this poem as “the one, perhaps, which comes nearest to a direct statement of [Dylan Thomas’s] Christian affinities” (63).

The first part of the poem ends in an enigmatic declaration: “Love is the last light spoken” (I.4.7), which indicates that love seems to be the ultimate, the most important experience in life. On the one hand, this can sound paradoxical and contradictory, but completely urgent, in a world destroyed and violated by the violence of war. On the other hand, this sounds very familiar, with the Christian message of love as the reason why God saved the world and as the ethical principle that guides the Christian life. A reference to love as an absolute value was already present in the end of the poem “After the Funeral”. Now, at this moment marked by the negativity of death, love is presented as a positive communicative luminous energy, as fertile as the “seed of sons in the loin of the black husk left” (I.4.8). Love is bright and energized with light, but the poet says that love is “the last light spoken” (I.4.7). How love can be related to words? This part may be related to the biblical passage from John when the apostle says that “the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father) full of grace and truth” (John 1:14), in connexion with his declaration that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (3:16). So love can be spoken, can be redemptive, can be illuminated with divinity.

The second part of the poem develops the significance of the child’s death through biblical and pagan mythology, characterizing the poem more and more as a religious ceremony in which the sacrifice of life is of central importance, as a Christian Mass. This second part invites us to visit the biblical myths of Adam and Eve and all the sacrificial symbolism of the Old Testament applied and accomplished in Jesus Christ on the cross. The biblical imagery is abundant. According to the narrative of the book of Genesis,

Adam and Eve were the originators of the human race and responsible for the entering of death in the history of humanity. Death is caused by their sin, it is taken as a consequence of their disobedience, and therefore mixed with a deep sense of guilt and wonder. The poet recognizes his uncertainty about who was “the first to die”, if Adam or Eve, if the “holy bullock” or the “white ewe lamb”, or if the “chosen virgin” (II.1.1-7). The bullock was used as the victim of the sacrifices in the Old Testament, as an atonement for the sin of the people. The lamb was also used in the Old Testament, in the sacrifice for the sins of the people of Israel, and it is used in the New Testament to identify and represent the mission and the character of the Messiah, according to the prophecy of Isaiah 53 which describes the Messiah as a silent lamb going to the slaughterhouse. The chosen virgin can be related to the pagan mythology, alien to the biblical tradition but very common in the cultural background of Europe in general, and Wales in particular. However, the Bible also presents Mary, Jesus’s mother, as the chosen virgin of Israel.

In the second stanza of the second part, the poet acknowledges that the legend of Adam and Eve will not be silent in his service over the dead infant. In a way, the poet distinguishes this special child from the generality of dead infants, and ascribes to it the characteristics of a legend, the capacity of being “priest and servant” at the same time (II.2.6). and “Word, singers, and tongue,” and the night fall of the serpent (II.2.7-10), and the fruit—of the knowledge of good and evil—and “man and woman undone” (II.2.11).

The poet gives significance to the absurdity the child’s death in the streets of London by elevating it to the stature of a myth. Using Christian and pagan symbols, the poem makes the child be more than an ordinary child and makes its death be more than an ordinary death in a world marked by the daily tragedy of war. The child seems to encompass the poles of a myth: it is the priest and the servant at the same time, for example; it is the serpent and the fruit at the same time, man and woman, in a kind of returning to the darkness of the beginning, in an anti-garden of Eden, “the garden of wilderness” (II.2.14). The child seems to symbolize the drama of human existence. For Aneirin Talfan Davies, this child is the legend, the myth “which foreshadows the conquest of that death which came through Adam, by the child” (61). For Davies, Thomas is talking about Jesus Christ. Of course, the allusion to a new-born child and saviour is there, but it does not make the poem a piece of Christian devotion or an orthodox interpretation of the gospel. The poem uses the biblical imagery and the symbols of the Christian ritual and theology only to give significance and importance to the death of this child, which happened in a secular, terribly devastating war. Symbolically, the child’s death receives some characteristics of Christ’s death and brings some illumination to the problem of death in the human existence, but Dylan Thomas is not preaching a sermon, he is just playing with words, images, and symbols, just enriching the poem with the emotional charge these symbols contain. Paul Ferris, however, admits that this question is “open to argument” (201).

A holistic significance surrounds the child, who represents Adam and Eve at the same time, the entire human tragedy, the pulse of life under the “head stone” (II.1.12), the sacrifice and the priest, the mystic “totalization” of the human experience and history. The child is all, a holistic expression of what life is. The child is life and death being dramatized in the streets of London, it is the myth invading the secular age, it is the sacred invading the profane, it is the invitation to a Mass in an age of disbelief, it is the sacrificial blood of the lamb in an age full of guilt and sin. It is light and darkness in an age full of darkness and the lightning of bombs. For Vernon Watkins it is the “pressure of the anarchy of war itself and the vision of distorted London” which inspired Dylan Thomas to write such beautiful poems like this one (quoted by Ferris 203). In the first stanza of the second part, the persona says: “I know not...” (II.101), he recognizes the reality of a mystery, the impotence of rational understanding, the open space to the mythological elements, the urge for some revelation. Therefore the poet gives the child the significance of a revelational, mythological phenomenon.

The third part of the poem represents the climax of this requiem, in which the music and the symbol reach their highest point. For D. F. Mckay this third part,

[I]like most visionary experiences in which the protagonist is invaded by divine power, the flight into the sun constitutes the consumation of being as well as a destruction. Thomas’ line “The sundering ultimate kingdom of genesis’s thunder” at the conclusion of “Ceremony After the Fire Raid” delineates the contradictory constituents of “such moments of pure energy.” (55)

This third part presents the paradox of life and death dramatized through the symbols of the Christian Mass, accomplishing this “magnificent ritualistic poem... where the paradox is, if not resolved, held in eternal equilibrium” (Davies 58). Talfan Davies even concludes that this poem constitutes a Catholic poem, in contrast with “After the Funeral” which he considers a Protestant one (58-9). Differently from “After the Funeral” which was basically a funeral oration and preaching, “Ceremony After a Fire Raid” constitutes a real ceremony, with the presence of a priest, the body of Christ, the chants, the candles, the fires (58-9). It is really interesting that Thomas has confessed to use a Catholic word—“Mass”—instead of a Protestant one—service. The word “mass” emphasizes the centrality of the sacrifice, contrasting with the general idea of praise conveyed by the “service,” centred in the preached word. The tone of the poem has changed from a sad lament and cry, from grief and mourning, to a rejoicing, full, and triumphant music (Ackerman 109), a Mass of glory and ecstasy. In the third part the “organpipes and steeples” of the cathedrals (III.1), the molten “weathercocks” and “dead clock” (III.3-5) are part of the scenery of the bombarded London, and its turbulent streets. The poet portrays an ecclesiastical but also a warlike London setting. The “urn of sabbaths” (III.6) suggests the traditional Sunday morning linked with the funereal image of the urn full of

ashes of cremated bodies. The image of the church furniture is contaminated and secularized by the images of deterioration and crisis, the scenery of war. Everything is imbued with religion and war, faith and destruction, glory and flame, gold and fire, the sanctity of wine and the secularism of brandy (III.12), religious ecstasy and the fire of hell. The poet sees London as a burning cathedral in a time of funeral ceremonies and sacrifices. Bread and wine are “transubstantiated” into war, bombing, cinders. The presence of death in the midst of life represents a surreal, musical, ecclesiastical, and secular Mass which proclaims the meaning of life on the verge of death, and the plenitude of the child who embraces the sun, and becomes united with nature. In the opinion of Paul Ferris, this poem is an affirmation of life resounding in the last eloquent lines “Glory glory glory / The sundering ultimate kingdom of genesis’ thunder” (201). The poem becomes a celebration of life, not a celebration of death, a solemn declaration of the positiveness and fulfillment of this mythical child united with the sea, symbol of the origin of life. In fact, the sea plays an important role in the sequence of the creation of the world and life.

John Ackerman understands this last mixing part of urban destruction and religious images of natural energy as a celebration of the triumph of life against death (109). Indeed, the child, London, and the sea become one; the individual, the city, and nature become one. When the individual is re-absorbed by nature, life receives meaning and death is overcome. Christian symbolism offered Dylan Thomas the tools to express his secular hope, his hope in the overcoming of death through reabsorption into the elements and movements of nature. The poem displays a crescendo until this last part, like a symphony in which the apocalyptic “Glory glory glory” represents the climax, according to the vision of the throne and the voices of many waters of the book of Revelation (4:2-11). The sacrificial death of the child produces salvation, regeneration, and the whole world can be redeemed. Revelation and Genesis, end and beginning seem to be linked in the child who dies and is one with the sea. The cathedral, the city, and nature celebrate the holy meaning of life and the overcoming of death through the mystical union with the elements. There is sin to be confessed, bread and wine to be swallowed, hymns to be sung, and everything is symbolically directed to the child dead on the altar — the streets of London.

In relation to the reality of life and death, Thomas makes innumerable references to his Christian tradition, sometimes suggesting a Christian interpretation of existence, sometimes seeming to deny his Christian heritage and to create a concept of his own, sometimes mixing his personal view with his Christian background, offering a kind of dialogue between his poetry and his culture. His attitude towards death has some points of contact with the Christian tradition, not in terms of absolute confirmation or absolute denial, but in terms of explicit allusions and use of images and diction, and in terms of a personal and aesthetic re-interpretation of the Christian values. In doing so, he can, for example, make an allusion to the doctrine of survival

of the individual through the resurrection of the body, but meaning the permanence of life through the reabsorption of the individual into the elements of nature.

There are many elements of concordance and discordance between Thomas's attitude towards death and the Christian tradition. In fact, Thomas's poetry was produced in the context of a Christianized society, Wales and England, although Thomas himself was not an actively religious man. In his childhood, he received various religious influences through his mother, from his relatives, from the reading of the Bible, the hymns, the preachers, the Sunday School. His poems contain an abundance of images, rhythms and concepts brought from the Bible. However, Thomas's poetry cannot be classified as devotional or religious or even orthodox Christian. His religiousness is characterized by a more generalized scope, a vague sense of God's presence in the world, an indefinite impression of the sacredness of life, and an ineffable recognition of the importance of the reality of death. The religious character of Thomas's poetry can be perceived in the formal and structural elements and even in the content of his poems. Sometimes they can be taken as a recasting of the Christian tradition, a re-interpretation of the Christian concepts and images. But since his attitude is religious but in a vague sense, his poetry cannot fit the Christian orthodoxy. In fact, Thomas's poetry presents a secular version of Christianity, a secular attitude towards life and death behind a Christian language and rhetoric, imagery and symbolism. God, in Thomas's poems, becomes a figure very different from the traditional Christian vision, more identified with the natural world, sometimes less involved in the human tragedy, sometimes sympathetic with mankind, sometimes less personal, sometimes becoming an undistinguished presence on the border of the universe. Nature is sacralized, taking God's place in the manifestation and communication of world's holiness and mystery. Death is seen from a different perspective, in spite of the use of Christian images and symbols. These religious elements present in Thomas's poetry are part of his cultural background, his linguistic and mythical universe, they are re-interpreted according to his subjectivity, mixed with some other non-Christian elements, and used for aesthetic and philosophical purposes rather than, let us say, for theological or devotional reasons.

The sense of mortality as part of the human condition is something present in Thomas's poetry and also in the Christian tradition. Human life is seen as surrounded, darkened by the shadows of death. On the horizon of the human existence there is always this figure of death as the limit, the direction. To be human is to be condemned to die. Calvin and Luther confirm the teaching of the Bible according to which, since the sin of Adam and Eve, death is something to which man is condemned. In contrast, Kierkegaard, representing a less orthodox Christianity, develops the idea of the individual being condemned to live, not to die, and so life would be the real problem of the human race. For Kierkegaard, the individual cannot die, he cannot understand the death of his own individuality, the death of his own self, then

the individual denies it and lives as if he were eternal. Besides, the individual can never get rid of his own individuality, of his own subjectivity. Death happens not as something the individual does consciously, but as something beyond the scope of his decision and existence, therefore he cannot die. For Kierkegaard, immortality is the real problem, not mortality. Dylan Thomas, however, seems to understand that the death of the individual constitutes the great problem of existence, the great theme of his poetry.

The sacralization of death constitutes another important element of Thomas's poetry. Contrasting with the Christian tradition, according to which death represents exactly the contrary of what is sacred, indicating a breaking up in the relationship with God, Thomas's poems in general present the forces of nature and the process of death as having a religious significance, a divine character. The poem "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" can exemplify Thomas's idea of sacredness of death, the notion of death as a mystery that is beyond human understanding, an idea that can be related to Kierkegaard's notion that death cannot be objectively apprehended by the individual, only subjectively. In fact, it can be said that very often nature takes the place of God as the absolute value in Thomas's poetry. Plunging into nature, the poet finds redemption, communion with God and life, a sense of accomplishment and the intensification of his existence. In contrast with nature, God is represented in very vague and indefinite terms. He is only a name, an indefinite other behind the world of nature. Indeed, according to the Christian tradition, there is a clear and important distinction between God as the creator of the universe and the natural world as the creation. There are also specific commandments against the adoration of the natural world, against the divinization of the sun, the stars, trees or animals. Only God shall be adored. Nature can even reflect the glory of God and stay as the silent manifestation of God's divinity, but it cannot be confounded with God himself. Calvin and Luther reject openly the idea of nature as being divine, the idea of pantheism, of believing that everything (*pan*) is God (*theos*). By making the natural world sacred, Thomas may have intended to portray a more direct, vivid, immanent relationship with God. By using this strategy, his poetry receives more intense images and creates a much more impressive, organic, visceral religious consciousness, in imitation maybe of the mystics of the Middle Ages or of the Metaphysical poets of the 17th century. This passionate vision, of course, contrasts with the abstract, transcendent God of the Protestant theology. Thomas's immanent God (nature) can be seen, heard, touched, smelled, experienced by the senses, without the interference of reason. The union with nature, provided by death, becomes a religious experience. This vision clearly contradicts the biblical understanding of nature as being created by God, as being something very distinct from Him who transcends the universe of nature. But according to the pantheistic vision, nature represents God's immanent presence, and is not

only a sign of it. Within the Christian tradition the individual has to transcend nature in order to find the true God, who is beyond nature.

In “Ceremony After a Fire Raid” Thomas transforms the death of an individual into a symbol of mythological importance. Luther and Calvin recommend that the Christian community respect the dead body and give it a worthy funeral, in accordance with the dignity of the Gospel, but they advise against exaggeration in the manifestation of emotions, the excess of luxury, and the adoration of the dead. The Christian should show a brave and optimistic attitude towards death, in agreement with the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body. The body of the dead is given to the earth and dissolved in the ground, where it waits for the resurrection, and the spirit is conducted towards God’s presence, where he awaits for the final judgment. Luther even suggests some epitaphs for the Christians’ tomb (“Christian Songs” 290-2).

In the Old Testament, the body of the dead was considered unclean but grief was allowed with manifestations of strong emotions, although there were clear limits in order to differentiate the tribes of Israel from the pagans, signs of grief like self-mutilation, for example, were totally forbidden. The person who touched a dead body or even the clothes of a dead person was considered unclean for seven days, therefore contact between the living and the dead was emphatically forbidden.

Thomas uses Christian images and rituals in order to celebrate the dead. Yet, contrasting with the Christian tradition, in spite of using Christian figures, images, and language, the poet goes in the opposite direction of the orthodoxy and even sacralizes the reality of death. Death becomes for the poet not something unclean, but holy in its very essence. The dead one becomes a saint, his/her image is idealized, his/her individuality is transformed and sanctified by the process of dying. This is something absurd according to the Old Testament perspective, and according to the thought of Calvin and Luther. For the Christian tradition, death becomes a sacred act only through martyrdom, which is a sacrifice in the name of faith. For Thomas, the dead one, either his father, or his aunt, or the old man in the streets of London, or the child, are all saints in their death, they are martyrs. They are elevated from the state of mortals to the state of saints, of idealized figures, of symbols of respect. Thomas makes death purify the individual, instead of making him/her impure.

One of Thomas’s clearest concepts is the overcoming of death through the integration of the individual into the forces of nature. For Thomas, the individual can overcome the fear of death by plunging into the world of nature. He suggests that the individual can survive and live in the elements of nature, in the tree, in the stream, in the flower. The biblical perspective is different, it teaches that the individual can overcome the reality of death through faith in the resurrection of the body, which is the revival of the individual’s body, recreated and perfected by God’s direct interference in the natural process. Of course this concept transcends the limits of reason

and can be expressed and accepted only in terms of faith. For Luther and Calvin, what gives peace to the heart of a dying individual is the belief in the resurrection of the body, in the reaffirmation of life after the experience of death. The idea of surviving in nature is not present in the Christian tradition. It seems to partake of some oriental religious ideas, such as the notion of the reabsorption of the individual into the whole. Thomas's plunge into the elements of nature seems to guarantee the continuity of life, but individuality is lost in the process, and it seems to suggest that individuality is taken only as an interruption in the cyclical organic unconscious movement of nature.

In this poem, Thomas seems to suggest the idea of love as being a positive energy capable of facing and surviving the destructive power of death. According to the New Testament teaching, love is an eternal creative force in the universe, since God is love (I John 4:16) and, as the apostle Paul suggests, prophecies, miracles and tongues will come to an end, but love will remain, because love is eternal (I Corinthians 13:8). Since love is an affection implying the relation of at least two persons and since love is described in the Christian tradition as eternal, then the relations between the individuals are eternal and will not be destroyed by death. The understanding of love as something eternal, something that death cannot destroy, brings life a great optimism that helps to overcome despair and the sense of emptiness caused by death. Yet it opposes the Old Testament concept of death as the end of all relationships and as the end of the relationship with God. If love is eternal, the power of death is limited and has no more dominion over life. So, in this aspect Thomas follows the Christian tradition, which considers love the energy which survives the destructive influence of death. With this emphasis on the permanence of love as the unbreakable linking with life, death becomes now, and it is Thomas who develops this idea, a way of union of the individual with the whole, with the absolute, which for him is nature, or God in nature. Death is no longer understood as a breaking down of all relations but as an opportunity to commune with nature, with the elements and forces of the universe, with the mystery of life. This characteristic of taking love as the supreme value of life gives Thomas the instrument he needed to affirm life in spite of and beyond the forces of death, and shows his ability of handling aesthetically Christian symbols.

Overcoming death seems to be possible in the poem. According to the Christian tradition, this is possible only by the acceptance of and faith in the sacrificial, redemptive death of Christ. Thomas uses the image of redemption in "Ceremony After a Fire Raid" without affirming the Christian tradition. The idea of a sacrificial birth and death is also present in the poem, as well as the affirmation of life, the wish to overcome the destructive elements brought by death. In the Christian tradition, the notion of Christ as the Redeemer of life, as the incarnation of God, as the synthesis of man and God is fundamental. Curiously, and contrasting with the Christian tradition, Thomas's overcoming of the fear of death does not imply the exercise of a literal faith in eternal life, which is replaced by the idea of integration of the

individual into the forces of nature. Faith in resurrection is replaced by a certain faith in the holy character of the natural world. This notion of faith as very emotional and volitional can be related to Kierkegaard's notion of faith as a human experience facing life and death. Yet, the concept of redemption seems to be present in Thomas's poem, salvation seems to be possible through the birth-death of this mythological child, this Messiah, this ambiguous Saviour who saves by burning, who gives life by threatening.

NOTES

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1 The parenthetical references to the poem are presented according to the poem's structure, and divided into two or more parts, which will be indicated in parenthesis with Roman numerals (I, II, III...). Stanzas and lines will be indicated by Arabic numerals, separated by a full stop (4.7). Then, for example, I quote the second line of the third stanza of the first part of the poem "Ceremony After a Fire Raid", and the parenthetical note should be (I.3.2).

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