

CHAPTER I

The Structure of the Early Prose

"The union of ritual and dream in the form of verbal communication is myth."

Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism

I

Dylan Thomas never typed his own stories for submission to periodicals, but he would copy the finished version in careful handwriting into the Red Notebook, from which he would dictate to a friend. Reading aloud was as important for the prose as for the poetry, and many stories were tried out before a group of friends during the Wednesday lunch hour in Swansea. In the same manner "The Enemies," "The Visitor," "The Orchards," "The Mouse and the Woman," and "The Burning Baby" were read aloud, mainly during 1934, to Pamela Hansford Johnson.¹

Although from 1934 on many of the tales were published in Welsh and English periodicals, Thomas was as concerned with bringing them together into one volume as he was with publishing collections of his poems. By 1937 he had assembled the major

early tales in *The Burning Baby* and had contracted with the Europa Press for publication. It was already advertised and the first edition subscribed when the printers balked on grounds of obscenity. A depressing back and forth of compromise and argument ensued, and, as the efforts of George Reavey of the Europa Press proved unavailing, Thomas began to toy with the idea of publishing the tales through Lawrence Durrell and Henry Miller in Paris (several stories, including "A Prospect of the Sea," were eventually translated in *l'Arche* by Francis Dufeu-L'Abeyrie). When the situation became hopeless Reavey turned the contract over to the Pearn, Pollinger, and Higham literary agency. Their good offices also proved useless, and although "In the Direction of the Beginning" found its way into a New Directions collection and several other stories were printed in *The Map of Love* and *The World I Breathe* (England and America, 1939), *The Burning Baby* never went to press.

The suppression of the early tales and the poor reception of the volumes that combined poetry and prose may have accounted in part for the abrupt change in prose style that occurred throughout 1938 and 1939. This was also, of course, a time of impending war when the outer world was pressing in upon Thomas as upon everyone else. The early prose tales were part of an inward universe that he constructed in his late teens and early twenties: the war not only disrupted this universe but afforded Thomas the opportunity of trying his hand at the

more public genres of broadcasting and "straight" narrative fiction. The early prose tales are much more a unity with the poetry than the later, more simplistic *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940) and "Adventures in the Skin Trade" (1941), which Thomas himself tended to deprecate. Although the late Vernon Watkins disagreed with me entirely, thinking that "Dylan always did what he wanted to do, in spite of the success or failure of his work,"² I think that with his pressing financial needs at that time he could not afford to write in a prose genre that had been poorly received by both printers and public.

The early prose was not collected until after Thomas' death: the two posthumous volumes, *A Prospect of the Sea* (England) and *Adventures in the Skin Trade* (America), did not appear until 1955.³ At that time they were often invidiously compared to the later prose (*Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* and *Under Milk Wood*) which had become popular and even beloved. American critics reserved judgement on the "poetic" and "difficult" pieces following "Adventures in the Skin Trade."⁴ But Davies Aberpennar in Wales and Kingsley Amis in England had already found them irresponsibly irrational, full of "factitious surrealist artifice," and built upon "characters and situations . . . which people in full possession of their faculties would not find interesting or important."⁵ Many admirers of the early poetry consigned the early prose to oblivion as juvenilia, or dismissed it as part of a macabre or dark phase which was as well forgotten. To G. S.

Fraser they were the "pièces noires" of Thomas' later "celebration of innocence." Fraser insists that "in writing these pieces, Thomas was grappling with, and apparently succeeded in absorbing and overcoming, what Jungians call the shadow."⁶

Such an opinion overlooks Thomas' lifelong bout with a "shadow" which he never overcame. The life of the poet, wrote Jung in the June 1930 *transition*, "is, of necessity, full of conflicts, since two forces fight in him: the ordinary man with his justified claim for happiness . . . , and the ruthless creative passion on the other which under certain conditions crushes all personal desires into the dust."⁷ Throughout the forties Thomas was caught in the toils of just such a conflict, and he devoted neither his later poetry nor his later prose to gay reminiscence. Perhaps the critics of the fifties were looking for their own prewar innocence in suggesting that the stories of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*, the short novel "Adventures in the Skin Trade," or the drama *Under Milk Wood* were visions of an unsullied, dirty-little-boy Eden. Like Blake's, Thomas' vision of innocence was through the eyes of experience.

Dylan Thomas was certainly not alone among twentieth-century writers in regarding madness, dream, and myth as a fertile source of imagery and narrative material. His tales are concerned with how the storyteller breaks from the bounds of consciousness into the unconscious world, what he experiences there, how he manages to return, and what happens if he does not return (Marlais takes

something resembling a psychedelic "trip" in "The Orchards," as does Peter in "The Visitor" and Nant in "The Lemon"). The inward journey of the poetic imagination, which is usually implicit in the poetry, is more explicit in the prose, where it is *the* adventure by which Thomas self-consciously defines his narrative mode.

Even though the symbolic forms of the unconscious provide both the goal of his heroes and the structure of his tales, he is careful that the unconscious world never usurps control of the narrative. As we shall see in Chapter 5, the only passages of "automatic writing" in the tales occur when Thomas wants to describe the abrogation of consciousness: he seems to have felt that the further inward the narrative penetrates, the stronger must be the role played by the intellect. "The more subjective a poem," he wrote, "the clearer the narrative line."⁸ The intense and often hallucinatory subjectivity of the early tales required an unusual amount of conscious control, and it is probably for this reason that Thomas intruded so often as omniscient narrator. As Jacob Korg has noted, he shapes paranoia and hallucination into "an atmosphere where the mind rules the material world, exercising its powers of creation and distortion over it."⁹

II

The "progressive line, or theme, or movement" which Thomas insisted upon for every poem is also present in every tale, where it is defined by the

progress of the hero from desire through quest to release and renewal. The plots are divided into three or four sections which succeed each other with the rhythm of ritual movements. The tales usually culminate in a sacrament or rite, an act of sexual release, or an archetypal vision. The release may take the form of the loosing of a flood (as in "A Prospect of the Sea" and "The Map of Love") or of an apocalyptic event ("The Holy Six," "An Adventure from a Work in Progress," "The Visitor"). Often the beginning of a new epoch of search and birth is implicit in the cataclysmic denouement, giving a cyclical shape to the narrative.

William York Tindall includes "landscape and sea, enclosures such as garden, island, and cave, and in addition city and tower" under the category of archetype. He goes on to explain that "uniting the personal and the general and commonly ambivalent, these images, not necessarily symbolic in themselves, become symbolic by context, first in our sleeping minds and then in poems."¹⁰ Thomas' landscapes embody the personal or sexual, the impersonal or mythical, and the poetic aspirations of his heroes. Images of the poetic quest seem to rise up as autonomous entities out of the countryside: words become incarnate in trees, in blood, and in the transforming sea. Often, at the denouement of a tale, they find their final expression in a "voice of thunder" which announces the hero's achievement.

Since Thomas' landscape is not only geographical but anatomical, personal or sexual imagery is latent in the countryside as well as in the bodies of hero

and heroine. The hills and valleys of "A Prospect of the Sea," "The Map of Love," the two fragments ("In the Direction of the Beginning" and "An Adventure from a Work in Progress"), and "The Holy Six" are metaphors of the feminine anatomy, the breasts, belly, and so forth, of the earth-mother herself. In "The Map of Love" the map which Sam Rib explicates is of sexual intercourse: the island "went in like the skin of lupus to his touch. . . . Here seed, up the tide, broke on the boiling coasts; the sand grains multiplied" (*AST*, p. 146). In the tales where the cyclical pattern is most pronounced the feminine landscape is itself circular, dominated by a woman who draws the hero into the "mothering middle of the earth." In "In the Direction of the Beginning," "An Adventure from a Work in Progress," "The Enemies," and "The Holy Six," the heroes walk from the rim of an island or valley through ancestral fields into intercourse. Each consummation is analogous to a mythological event, during which the island or circular valley participates in an orgy of division and regeneration. As Dr. Maud has aptly pointed out, Thomas' mingling of geographic and sexual imagery is a successful method of "distancing the intimate," a means of describing the act of love so that both its intimate and mythical qualities are dramatically embodied.¹¹

Neither the aesthetic imagery, which expresses the poetic quest of the hero, nor the sexual imagery of a given tale predominates. In each case poetic and anatomical metaphors describe a narrative line which is essentially mythological, both in the inward

sense ("the union of ritual and dream in the form of verbal communication") and in the outward or historical sense (the use of Welsh, Egyptian, and other folklore for background). The final synthesis is always personal: images describing the heroes' thrust towards sexual and poetic maturity are overlaid by thematic antitheses of unity and division, love and death. "Poetry in its social or archetypal aspect," notes Frye, "not only tries to illustrate the fulfillment of desire, but to define the obstacles to it. Ritual is not only a recurrent act, but an act expressive of a dialectic of desire and repugnance: desire for fertility or victory, repugnance to draught or to enemies."¹² We shall see how demonic vitality and senile repression form the poles of "The Enemies" and "The Holy Six"; in "The Mouse and the Woman" and "The Map of Love" we shall find heroes suspended between fear of the flesh and sensual desire.

"If ritual is the cradle of language," declares Suzanne Langer, "metaphor is the law of its life."¹³ Thomas' narratives depend upon the conflict, merger, and progression of specific metaphors. Given the analogy of geography and anatomy which underlies most of the early tales, even his descriptive images bear a metaphorical burden. In "The Burning Baby," for example, the relationship between images of gorse, flesh, and fire marks the progression of the plot towards its grim crescendo. At the outset, Thomas describes Rhys Rhys preaching a sermon on "The beauty of the harvest" and explains that in the preacher's mind "it was not the ripeness of God

that glistened from the hill. It was the promise and the ripeness of the flesh, the good flesh, the mean flesh, flesh of his daughter, flesh, flesh, the flesh of the voice of thunder howling before the death of man" (*AST*, p. 91). The biblical metaphor of flesh to grass is the raw material of Rhys' perversion. It embodies both the sensual level ("the flesh of his daughter") and the poetic level ("the flesh of the voice of thunder") of the plot.

Further on in the tale a third element is added to the metaphor: the little brother "saw the high grass at [his sister's] thighs. And the blades of the upgrowing wind, out of the four windsmells of the manuring dead, might drive through the soles of her feet, up the veins of the legs and stomach, into her womb and her pulsing heart" (*AST*, p. 93). The grass has become an even more explicitly sexual metaphor, each blade being analogous to the father's phallus. The "upgrowing wind" surging through the grass is in turn analogous to the spirit, both as the biblical wind which "bloweth where it listeth" and as the impregnator of Mary. Coming into conjunction with flesh the fiery biblical wind ignites as the elements of gorse, flesh, wind, and fire merge in the burning baby. The denouement is organic, in the sense of propounding a natural, season-oriented or cyclical worldview. Rhys Rhys sets fire to the gorse to burn the incestuously begotten son as the tale concludes, its final scene a variation on Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, God's sacrifice of Christ, and man's perennial sacrifice of himself.

"The Burning Baby" is a fairly early and straight-

forward tale from the Red Notebook in September, 1934. We shall see in Chapter 5 how, in "The Mouse and the Woman," "The Lemon," and "The Orchards," Thomas uses images from a series of related dreams to underline the narrative. In the tales where there is no dreaming he makes use of a similar mode of metaphorical progression. For each of the three key characters of "The Enemies" and "The Holy Six," the world shapes itself into images appropriate to his perception of it. Mr. Owen is a kind of Great-Uncle Jarvis, a lover of the "vegetable world" that "roared under his feet." Endowing his garden with his own virility, he works upon the "brown body of the earth, the green skin of the grass, and the breasts of the Jarvis hills." Mrs. Owen's feminine powers are embodied in her crystal ball, which contains the extremities of hot and cold, clarity and obscurity and is analogous both to her womb and to the round earth whirling outside of the house. Davies, withered with age and insubstantial with sterility, perceives the Jarvis valley as a place of demonic vitality, death, and nausea. Throughout the narrative, it remains a "great grey green earth" that "moved unsteadily beneath him."

Ghostliness, virility, and demonic lust are embodied in Davies' nausea, Owen's garden, and Mrs. Owen's crystal ball. As the narrative moves towards its consummation the action moves entirely indoors to concentrate upon the ball and Mrs. Owen's pregnant womb. The six clergymen are made to share in Davies' nausea, vomiting up their desires under the influence of "mustard and water." At the

denouement the conflict centers upon a question of paternity: whose child is in Mrs. Owen's womb? Ghostliness triumphs as Davies is assured that he has not loved Amabel in vain. As Owen, like Callaghan, laughs that there should "be life in the ancient loins," Davies sees "the buried grass shoot through the new night and move on the hill wind." Mr. Owen is revealed as the midwife-gardener to Mrs. Owen and Davies, laboring to bring new life out of a woman who conceives only in the arms of death. The antithetical metaphors of virility and ghostliness are woven into a new synthesis by Mrs. Owen's paradoxical desires. The narrative as a whole is a symbolic representation of an apocalyptic union of spirit and flesh, the dead and the living.

So intensely does Thomas concentrate upon a metaphor to make it render its utmost significance that his figures nearly burst their usual function, no longer representing a similarity but a metamorphosis. It is as if he, like his heroes, could change real objects into their subjective equivalents, and elements of the outer world into his lyric image of them. Thus in "A Prospect of the Sea" the boy sees a tree turn into the countryside: "every leaf of the tree that shaded them grew to man-size then, the ribs of the bark were channels and rivers wide as a great ship; and the moss on the tree, and the sharp grass ring round the base, were all the velvet covering of a green country's meadows blown hedge to hedge" (*AST*, p. 127). By a process similar to hallucination the objects of the landscape become elements of a subjective vision, the tree on the hill

becoming a symbolic expression of the boy's own transformation.

"The chief source of obscurity in these stories," remarks Jacob Korg, "is the fact that imagined things are expressed in the language of factual statement instead of the language of metaphor."¹⁴ Thus when Thomas writes of the girl in "A Prospect of the Sea" that "the heart in her breast was a small red bell that rang in a wave," one cannot comprehend the metaphor until one accepts the previous statement that the waves not only resemble but *are* a "white-faced sea of people, the terrible mortal number of the waves, all the centuries' sea drenched in the hail before Christ" (*AST*, p. 131). The girl herself *is* a wave, her heart a meeting place of men and mermen, land and sea. If the sea is a metaphor of the human race, it is what Tindall has termed a "metaphysical metaphor," symbolic in itself and an "element of a symbolic structure."¹⁵

Thomas' "metaphysical metaphors" are thematic symbols embodying the progression and antitheses upon which such a narrative depends. They are not literary tokens heightening realistic situations in the classic sense, nor are they incorporated into the tales from an external system. Within each story, they are distinguished from minor metaphors by the way that they juxtapose, blend, and contain the several dominant themes. The tree in "The Tree," "A Prospect of the Sea," and "The Orchards"; the house in "The Enemies," "The Holy Six" and "The Dress"; and the tower in "The Lemon" and "The School for Witches" are such inclusive symbols.

None of them is the only major symbol in its context, however. Tree, tower, and house form a symbolic triad in "The Tree"; orchard, scarecrow, and maiden are one among several such triads in "The Orchards," while house, hill, and sea contain the thematic meaning of "The Mouse and the Woman" and "A Prospect of the Sea."

In each tale, objects contract and expand, merge and reshape themselves according to the pressure of the hero's mind. Like a magician, the poet-hero forces the image of a thing to become the thing itself. Although he draws upon the worlds of magic, folk belief, and madness for his material, Thomas exercises careful control over it, subordinating it to the expression of the hero's quest for meaning. Discontented with images and metaphors that are merely literary and decorative, the hero condemns the "dead word," story-princesses, and conventional metaphors, forcing himself into the dangerous world of the unconscious where symbols are live things which devour as they illuminate. Since the stories are about the search for a source of all story the symbolic visions which mark each denouement are ends in themselves.

III

It is a pity that there are no recordings of the early tales, which Thomas read aloud during the Wednesday lunch hours to his Swansea friends and, in London, to Pamela Hansford Johnson and her mother at 53 Battersea Rise. For all of its wordi-