

Man and Mandala: Symbol as Structure in a Poem by Dylan Thomas

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IT'S rather disconcerting to launch into a poem and find oneself knee-deep in a womb which, on closer inspection, turns out to be part of a vast ocean. It's rather unsettling to find oneself nudged at every turn by tall thin objects which, again on careful perusal, reveal themselves as militant ranks of phalli; and it's usually the last straw when one turns fastidiously away from these only to stub one's toe on a planet or two. But such is, not infrequently, the experience a reader has when exploring a poem by Dylan Thomas: we're confronted by a landscape in which *everything* is symbolic, and not merely symbolic in a small-time way, but on a grandiosely cosmic scale.

So huge does the perspective become, in fact, that the span of human life tends to telescope until it virtually disappears: our allotted time is reduced to an ephemeral instant in which birth and death are contiguous, if not simultaneous. So, in the poem on which I wish to concentrate in this article, "I See the Boys of Summer,"¹ we get from the outset the immediate juxtaposition of "summer" and "ruin," "harvest" and "freeze," "heat" and "winter," and so on — the polarities of our existence figured in seasonal terms and squashed together. Further than this, the ambiguities in certain key words and phrases reflect the synchronous co-existence of life and death in a single moment: "seedy," in the poem in question, means "worn out" or "run to seed" (suggesting death), but at the same time it suggests the semen-seed of procreation and life. Similarly, the "wreath" in part two of the poem is a *memento mori*, but also the laurel wreath of the victor at the height of his powers, or of the bardic poet in the triumphant moment of his life. The "worm" of the gro-

tesquely suppressed conceit in this section² is at once the scavenger of death and the "fathering worm"³ of the penis. The "man of straw" in this part of the poem is the counterpart of the Yeatsian scarecrow or the Eliotean hollow man; but it is also reminiscent of the "corn dolly" that presides over the harvest, or the effigy that, though turning to ash, at least for its moment burns with a fierce hot flame of life. The "sons of flint and pitch" in the final stanza are the sons of death and darkness (the colour of flint and pitch suggesting the dark clothes of mourning and the onset of physical night); but they are the sons too of the bright spark to be struck from the flint, and of the flare of life to be ignited in the highly inflammable pitch.

All of this — the close proximity of (or even the identity of) life and death in Thomas's early poetry — is common knowledge, adequately documented in any number of academic works. My purpose in emphasising it here is merely to draw attention to the way in which a vast symbolic scale can dwarf what are for us poor humans the apparently crucial realities of our existence. The telescoping of the human time scale can be a rather dangerous poetic tactic: although we say occasionally that "Time flies," we hardly ever envisage it as taking off with quite the speed that Thomas suggests. Consequently his poetic world may strike us as a distortion of the "facts" as they appear — a life with which we feel (most of the time) unable to identify because it is so totally incommensurate with any external world that we recognize, and hence not affective. Indeed, so alien may the projected universe grow that it ceases to be significantly relevant to us at all, and becomes at best a rather cardboard stage-set of irritatingly histrionic theatricality. The fault is illustrated time and again in the neo-Thomasian poetry of the New Apocalypse group in England in the forties. Here, for example, is part of a poem by Henry Treece:

A white horse proudly walked along a hill,
 Bearing an eagle, who with bloody claw,
 Tore out its entrails just before the wall;
 I saw the horse blaze banners from his eye.

This, from the modestly entitled, "Towards a Personal Armageddon,"⁴ may be all very well (though I suspect it isn't) — until we reach the end of the sequence; at which point we discover that all the ponderously organized machinery of the poem has in fact served no detectable purpose at all; by aspiring to mean everything, it has ended up meaning nothing. Such is the basic danger in the huge-symbolic approach.

But it is a danger of which Thomas, by virtue of being a brilliant verse technician, manages to steer clear (at least most of the time). Usually he manages to avoid shell-shocking his audience into uncomprehending submission under a battery of heavy symbols. By a careful choice and manipulation of appropriate *archetypes*, he contrives to retain the vast scope while at the same time not totally alienating his audience; he satisfyingly achieves a strictly regulated and significant poetic whole — a world which, though clearly not a naturalistic imitation of our own, has enough in common with it to be imaginatively sustaining.

It is my main intention in this article to look very carefully at the use of one such archetypal symbol in a particular Thomas poem, in order to illuminate the functional complexity of the symbol, and in order to suggest its organic necessity (the way in which it mirrors and dramatizes the basic statement being made) within the poem. The archetypal symbol chosen for this purpose (I have already mentioned above my choice of poem) is perhaps the best known of all — that of the mandala.

At this point the question must arise as to how far Thomas himself was familiar with the Jungian brand of speculative psychology; for unless he had heard of archetypes and mandalas, it is unlikely (to say the least) that he could have consciously used them in his poetry.

Inevitably one enters here the realm not of proofs but of plausibilities — unless of course there exists some unambiguous statement by the poet himself (and if there does in this present case, I have been unable to find it). This is unfortunate; but at least there is a high possibility

of Thomas's having been familiar with Jung's work, however superficially. Lawrence Durrell, for instance, writes that Thomas "had heard of Freud and Jung" even if "he had not at this time [the time of publication of *Eighteen Poems*, 1934] read either."⁵

Psychology in general seems to have been one of the "in" subjects among poets in the early thirties — boosted, no doubt, by the advent of that (then) trendiest of avant-garde poetry movements, surrealism (which was just becoming better known in England at this time).⁶ Moreover, Jung's particular interest in the psychology of art and literature — as revealed in such titles as *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature* — must have been appealing to, and much discussed among, the progressive new poets of the time. His important work, *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, came out in 1933 — just a year before Thomas published "I See the Boys of Summer" for the first time (in *New Verse*, June 1934). Rather earlier than this (in June 1930) Jung had published in a periodical to which Thomas was later to contribute — *transition* — an article on "Psychology and Poetry,"⁷ in which he mentioned the vision within the work of art in terms of "*real symbol*" (p. 34), spoke of his theory of the "*collective unconscious*" (p. 37) and of the artist as "*collective man*" (p. 41), and even referred to a mandala as illustration (pp. 35-36).

Archetypes and mandalas were in the literary air, then, and being discussed in readily available journals at about the time Thomas wrote "I See the Boys of Summer." Indeed it may be more than coincidence (though I admit, also, it may *not*) that Thomas in 1934 reviewed a book of poems whose title, *Squared Circle*,⁸ seems to refer to a mandala, the *quadratura circuli* of alchemy. And of course Thomas's own interest in alchemy — his yearning for the "spelling in the scurry/Of *chemic* blood," [my italics]⁹ — is another datum one might wish to consider in assessing the likelihood of the poet's being familiar with mandalas. Overall, it seems to me, the evidence points circumstantially though not conclusively towards Thomas's familiarity, at

least to some degree, with the idea of archetypes and mandalas. Reinforced by this information, let us now proceed to the main area of discussion.

Before getting into the poem itself, though, I want to consider, very briefly, the advantages a poet may gain from using archetypes, and the appropriateness in particular to Thomas's poetic purposes of the mandala.

In basic terms, Jungian psychology provides a convenient initial justification for the use of any type of archetypal symbolism: such usage allows the poet to tap resources of wisdom and knowledge which are in some way extra- (supra-?) rational. Jung wrote, in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*:

Do we ever understand what we think? We only understand that thinking which is a mere equation, and from which nothing comes out but what we have put in. That is the working of the intellect. But beyond that there is a thinking in primordial images — in symbols which are older than historical man; which have been ingrained in him from earliest times, and, eternally living, outlasting all generations, still make up the groundwork of the human psyche. It is only possible to live the fullest life when we are in harmony with these symbols; wisdom is a return to them.¹⁰

The poet, then, by handling archetypes, may be able to express the ancient and timeless truths of the "collective unconscious" which are intellectually ineffable. His product, therefore (though in a decade of burgeoning social realism) will *not* have to be in competition with scientific rationalism or intellectual journalism; but will be in another (the poet would presumably say, "higher") area of exploration.

Further than this, though, the *mandala* in particular among archetypes is eminently significant. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* it is "a representation of the cosmos, a consecrated area in which the forces of the universes are collected." In passing we might note that this would be an ideal definition of certain of Thomas's early poems — since they are verbal rituals, or symbolic statements, within which are gathered the elemental energies of the universal life force. Most frequently the mandala symbol occurs in the form of a circle divided into four equal

parts by a vertical and horizontal cross; representing, as Jung himself states, "the synthesis of the four elements which are forever tending to fall apart."¹¹ The "four elements" in question are the Heraclitean and alchemical quaternity of earth, air, water, and fire, seen bound together within a circle of perfection. Thus the mandala traditionally functions symbolically in a *holistic* sense, in much the same way as does Thomas's own insistence on primitive animism — his inclusion of man's energies as an integral part of a cosmic whole of natural energies ("The force that through the green fuse drives the flower/Drives green age").¹² Just as his ideal state in the early poetry seems to be a synthesis of natural elements, so too is the mandala symbol.

This symbol, Jung continues, tends to occur ". . . in adults who . . . are confronted with the problem of opposites in human nature . . .":¹¹ what could be more appropriate to Thomas, who was deeply concerned with the polar opposites of birth and death, and also with man's dual character as both natural-being and machine-creator? The seemingly mutually exclusive (almost schizoid) opposition of these two facets of man is explored and dramatised in the first section of the poem, "I, in my Intricate Image."¹³ Man is part of the natural dispensation, a "man of leaves," a "rose" living in a "world of petals;" but he is also "Forged in man's minerals" with a "bronze root" — part of the manufactured, artificial, (and here counterfeit) world of metal. In the early poems, Thomas appears to regard the pre-natal existence (the passive one, lying in the womb of the mother who becomes representative of, microcosm for, the Great Earth Mother) as a paradisaical one. Birth then becomes a "Fall," after which man begins to assert his self-will; his desire to gain dominion over nature ruining the holistic unity of primitive animistic existence, and tearing himself in two (the "two levels" of "I, in my Intricate Image"). One can see, in the light of Jung's comment about being confronted with opposites in human nature, the possible significance of the mandala as synthe-

sising device for Thomas, to heal the polar divisions implicit in man's state on earth, and to re-achieve the ideal wholeness. It is my contention that this is precisely the use to which the poet ultimately puts the mandala symbol in "I See the Boys of Summer."

On the most external of levels, the poem's structure as a whole might be said to form a mandala. The first line of the first section of the poem is formulaically repeated (with small but significant differences) in the first line of the final section, bringing the poem round "full circle." Within this full circle, the two main sections are each divided up into four equal stanzas — suggesting the quaternary division of the mandala.¹⁴

The first section of the poem is given over to the spokesman for old age and, as one might expect, his view of the young men's activities (from the perspective of advancing years) is a rather jaundiced one. Though he sees life, it is a very small "I"; whereas DEATH appears in capitals for him. Consequently, if we look for mandalas here we may reasonably expect them (if they are dynamic, and fit the direction of the poem) to be in some way negative — *not* affirmations of the life-force, since any such affirmation would be inappropriate in the context of the old man's argument. And indeed when we do look closely we discover that the mandala pattern is tampered with in some way — rendered negative, either through incompleteness or through what one might call "pejorative context."

In the old man's assessment of human vitality we find a number of circles, but they are *empty* (either literally or figuratively). Firstly we have the circular shape of the "cargued apples," apparently the fruit of the seasonal cycle, the "gold" "store" of the "harvest;" but the old man, in the way he marshals his argument, drags down harvest into winter, making life "barren" or "frozen," turning the ritual harvest celebration (the "bobbing for apples" ceremony implied in the last line of stanza one) into a desperate gesture in the face of death. These apples remind us, then, not of natural fecund growth (in both man and natural

universe) as much as of the fatal apple-picking in Eden, and the resultant Fall and subsequent tribulations.

Later, we have the sun and the moon (traditionally symbolized diagrammatically by circles, or parts of circles); here, though, not symbols of cosmic grandeur, but of emptiness — the “zero” and the “void.” There is no sign of the cross which would fill out the circle of life, making it into a mandala.

In the third stanza Thomas speaks of the “deep” of the womb and its “quartered shades:” here perhaps is a genuine mandala, the symbolically circular womb divided into four (I am ignoring the meaning of “quartered” in the sense of “housed” or “lodged” here because it is not relevant to the discussion in hand). But the life symbol is rendered negative by the ambiguity of “shades,” suggesting “ghosts” and, by extension, death; and also by its place immediately following the mysterious line about the newly-born babies who “Divide the night and day” This is of crucial importance to an awareness of the negative aspect of the mandala in the following line. Earlier, I mentioned Thomas’s concept of birth as a Fall away from the primal innocence of a primitive animistic relationship with the natural forces governing the universe. Well, the birth in this stanza of “I See the Boys of Summer” is a Fall too. Whereas the pre-natal relationship with nature was as part of the unified whole, at birth the new babies immediately begin to “Divide:” that is, in order to dominate nature in the wilful way man does, he must first understand it, and in order to understand it he must first measure it, and in order to measure it conveniently he must first divide it into manageable pieces so that his science can assimilate it. Thomas speaks in more detail of this divisive aspect of man’s will in the poem, “From Love’s First Fever to her Plague.” He claims that, once having “learnt the verbs of will,” his attitude to the world changed and “What had been *one* was *many* sounding minded” [my italics]. His vision then became, not holistic or synthetic, but analytic, and “From the divorcing sky I learnt the double,/The two-

framed globe that spun into a score.”¹⁵ What we have here, then, is the negative process, of divide and rule; or the attempted negative re-creation of the universe in man’s own (“intricate” and anarchically multiple) image. Man’s potentially positive urge to create becomes stigmatised by *hybris*, since it was, in the beginning, *God’s* prerogative to divide the light from the darkness, and to create the universe and man (in *His* image). Consequently the mandala in stanza three is negative in symbolic value: the crossed quarters of the circle are not part of an affirmation of natural order, but an imposition on his external surroundings of man’s will for divisive measurement.

Section two of the poem embodies the boy’s answer to the old man. They, in stressing the active vitality of their own lives (while yet accepting the inevitability of death), see his attitude as entirely passive and defeatist. This is conveyed by another negative mandala, occurring in the first stanza of part two: the circular face of the clock, divided up into the four “chiming quarter[s]” of the quarter-hours. The mandala is negative because the division of four within it is once more an arbitrary, mechanical, man-made measurement: we have routine temporality (and its inevitable drift towards death) rather than cosmic timelessness.

It is not until the third stanza that the natural vitality of the boys becomes manifested in a positive mandala — the “four-winded spinning.” Here the circle part of the archetype is the globe of earth, and the division into four is accomplished by reference to the elemental energies of the four winds (north, south, west, and east around the circle). That it is truly a life-affirming symbol is emphasized in the fine lines immediately following; in which the boys hurl the sea into the desert and swamp the land with chaotic fertility:

Green of the seaweeds’ iron
 Hold up the noisy sea and drop her birds,
 Pick the world’s ball of wave and froth
 To choke the deserts with her tides

This gives an impression of surging strength ("iron") and irresistible forward movement, as often in Thomas's descriptions of the sea. The ocean, of course, is a crucial focus of attention for him — life first came from it, and the poet seems to regard it still as a repository of life power (hence, for instance, the menstrual cycle is described frequently in terms of "tides"); possibly this is because the sea shares the greenness of the vital natural force in the "green fuse." In any event, the overall impression of these lines immediately following the mandala is one of glorious surging life (as, later, in a rather different context, is the eruption of "The masses of the infant-bearing sea").¹⁶

In the final stanza of the boys' statement we get reference to the ritual cross — the crossing of the forehead with holly, and later the cross on which the sacrificial victim is impaled, promising a renewal of life in the new year. So the boys are able to supply the cross that was missing from the centre of the old man's "zero" or "void," and the synthesis of the whole mandala becomes possible.

It is in the final part of the poem, a single stanza, that the synthesis is finally effected. In a sort of antiphonal chant the old man's and the boys' voices reiterate the statements of thesis and antithesis: the old man still insists that life is "barren," while the boys emphasize the fact that it is "full." Then in the final line the polar opinions "kiss" in a gesture of Love as they coincide, and Thomas leaves us with his last word — the "cross,"¹⁷ once more back in the completed circle of the poem, the mandala perfect in the climactic synthesis of the work of art.

I do not wish to suggest by any means that Thomas's poetic symbolism is *always* as strictly yet dynamically patterned (or for that matter as meaningful) as it is in "I See the Boys of Summer:" such a brilliantly wrought symbolic structure seems to me to be rare, even in Thomas's corpus. However, this single example would be sufficient to belie the poet's own rather pessimistic opinion that, faced only with "the stony idiom of the brain," and with an over-worked "patch of words/Left by the dead" he could come

up with nothing better than "a spent-out cancer."¹⁸ Certainly the creative act, in this poem at least, culminates not in an abnormal growth strangling itself (as it so often did in the hands of lesser poets), but in a splendid resolution of vital energies, a positively archetypal affirmation.

NOTES

¹*Collected Poems: 1934-1952* (London: Dent, 1952), pp. 1-2. Further references are to this edition.

²The outrageous image here equates the entrance into the mine of the miner's shaft of light on his safety helmet with the entrance into the womb of the phallus — the phallus in this case being represented by the glow-worm (light and life [semen] often being equated in Thomas's poetry — hence the phallus as candle, the "candle in the thighs," the "candle [which] shows its hairs" in "Light Breaks where no Sun Shines" [*Collected Poems*, p. 21]; of the "rush/Light of his thighs" in "In the White Giant's Thigh" [*ibid.*, p. 162]).

I have called this conceit a "suppressed" one because the intricately tied-in parallels of the analogy are not there as they would have been in a metaphysical conceit.

³See "Before I Knocked," *Collected Poems*, p. 6.

⁴In *Invitation and Warning* (London: Faber, 1942), p. 84.

⁵In E. W. Tedlock, ed., *Dylan Thomas: the Legend and the Poet* (London: Mercury Books, 1963), p. 35.

⁶Charles Madge had published the important essay, "Surrealism for the English" in *New Verse* in December 1933, and was to follow it up with "The Meaning of Surrealism" in *New Verse* in August 1934. So although surrealism had scarcely reached its heyday (1935-36) at the time that Thomas set about writing "I See the Boys of Summer," it was at least coming to writers' attention by then.

⁷Nos. 19-20 (June 1930), 23-45.

⁸By William Montgomerie. Thomas's review appeared in *Adelphi*, 8, no. 6 (September 1934), 418-20.

⁹In "Especially when the October Wind," *Collected Poems*, p. 15.

¹⁰Trans. W. S. Dell and Gary F. Baynes (London: Kegan Paul, 1933), pp. 129-30.

¹¹In *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, in *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, IX, 1, trans. R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), p. 387.

¹²*Collected Poems*, p. 8.

¹³*ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

¹⁴There are, of course, other possible interpretations of this structure (the seasonal cycle; the human growth from conception to prime), and other structural devices at work (in particular the dialectical philosophical division of thesis, Part I, antithesis, Part II, and synthesis, Part III). But I draw attention specifically to the mandala-structure because this

seems to me the most fitting interpretation in the context of this poem, and the most central to the poet's preoccupations: it is not the *only* possibility, but it strikes me as one of the most likely.

¹⁵*Collected Poems*, p. 19.

¹⁶"Ceremony after a Fire Raid," *ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁷I know it could be argued that my reading would suggest "cross" as a noun, when in fact it is here clearly a verb. But I do not see this as a serious objection to the plausibility of my interpretation. After all, Thomas's playing on words often stretches over grammatical boundaries: in "Ceremony after a Fire Raid," for instance, he plays on the double meaning of the word "dug" — at one level the past participle of the verb "to dig" and on another level the noun which is synonymous with "nipple" (*Collected Poems*, p. 121).

¹⁸"From Love's First Fever to her Plague," *ibid.*, p. 19.