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**‘Subjugating the Beast and the Angel:  
Suggestions of Dante’s *Inferno* in ‘Altarwise by owl-light’**

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‘Altarwise by owl-light’ is one of Thomas’s most intransigent poems, an intricately woven text of images and symbols. It has generated, over the years, a great variety of interpretations ranging from the astrological, to the Freudian to the Surrealistic<sup>i</sup>. The reading of this poem often involves a search for sources, the unravelling of references and allusions. For instance, in some of the sonnets’ most seemingly surreal lines<sup>ii</sup>, at the end of Sonnet V, an unexpected source has been discovered by Walford Davies and Ralph Maud. In -

Cross-stroked salt Adam to the frozen 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.<sup>iii</sup>

- the image of the ‘waste seas where the white bear quoted Virgil’ originates in an allegorical text by Anatole France entitled *L’île des pingouins*<sup>iv</sup>. There now remains the problem of finding out who the ‘frozen angel’ and the ‘black medusa’ are, and of piecing together the elements.

This paper will offer suggestions regarding these and other images, by concentrating on allusions, in the poem, to Dante’s *Inferno*. In the process, it will raise a previously unrecognised possibility in the core interpretation of the poem.

The image of the ‘frozen angel’ in these few lines from Sonnet V is probably the one which is most clearly reminiscent of Dante. Clark Emery has already suggested that one of the many allusions in this image is to Dante’s Satan, but he did not pursue the idea<sup>v</sup>. The point is, however, worthy of further investigation, as the sonnet sequence holds several other images reminiscent of Satan as depicted in the *Inferno*.

In Canto XXXIV, Satan is portrayed as a fallen angel frozen in ice at the centre of the earth. He has six huge fanning wings with which he generates a wind that freezes Lake Cocytus - the lake of Hell - for eternity. Satan is dipped from mid breast down into that lake of ice which holds the bent and twisted bodies of sinners.

Some of the characteristics attributed to Satan in this Canto are intimated in the Sonnets, even before the ‘frozen angel’ is mentioned. For instance, in Sonnet III, the speaker describes his descent ‘breast-deep’ from ‘the vaults’:

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 . . .  
(III, 7-10)

In the *Inferno*, Satan, a seraph who has fallen from the vaults of Heaven, is seen as emerging “midbreast above the ice-field yon”<sup>vi</sup>. The ice-field holds the bodies of those who have descended to the pit of Hell. In Dante’s description:

Some stand erect, others are prone below;  
one here head up, soles uppermost one there;  
another face to foot bent, like a bow.<sup>vii</sup>

In Thomas’s line -

Dipped me breast-deep in the descended bone . . .

- ‘[d]ipped’ implies that the narrator is plunging into some liquid, and the liquid is made of ‘descended bone’. We have here a strong suggestion of Satan as depicted by Dante, mid breast in Lake Cocytus, the lake of descended bodies. Thus, Satan appears to be one of the poem’s protagonists even before the ‘frozen angel’ is mentioned in Sonnet V.

His presence is also hinted at in Sonnet IV, where the narrator is asking a series of questions to a mysterious interlocutor. We saw that Lake Cocytus is frozen by the wind generated by Satan’s six huge fanning wings. Dante’s Satan is said to flap them continually, always keeping “three winds” in motion:

He flapped them constantly,  
keeping three winds continuously in motion . . .<sup>viii</sup>

In Sonnet IV, the narrator must know that he is addressing Satan, for he asks him:

Which sixth of wind blew out the burning gentry?  
(IV, 5)

The idea, here, is that one of the six wings is always in motion, so that at any one time, one sixth of wind freezes the lake; thus, one sixth of wind only ‘blew out the burning gentry’. The ‘burning gentry’ can be understood to refer to the group of sinners, who were burning with anger or envy or lust or any of the seven deadly sins, but whose fire is now extinguished in the Hell of ice. The narrator is asking a rhetorical question: which of your six wings ‘blew out’ the fire of these sinners?

In Sonnet V, then, we can understand the ‘frozen angel’ to be Satan, the seraph who has fallen from the vaults of Heaven mid breast into Lake Cocytus, which he keeps locked in ice with the freezing wind of his six wings. The line -

Cross-stroked salt Adam to the frozen angel . . .

- has to mean, principally, that Adam is going to the Devil, that he is going to Hell. We shall consider later the question of why this might be. For now, we shall concentrate on another figure in this journey to Hell, that of a ‘black medusa’. The medusa, in Sonnet VI, invites Adam to ‘pluck’ her ‘eye’ and cut out her ‘fork-tongue’:

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 . . .  
(VI, 5-7)

It becomes clear that this indeterminate medusa is connected to Medusa of Greek mythology, whose glance turned men into stone, and whose head was covered in hissing snakes. The classical character, Medusa, also appears during Dante’s journey to Hell. Like the Furies, her role is to guard Lower Hell, so we should not be

surprised to find a similar figure in Adam's journey to Hell. In Canto IX, Medusa is called by the Furies to turn Dante into stone. And in Sonnet VI, she similarly sets out to strike Adam. Her deadly glance is referred to as 'the stinging siren's eye'; it is a treacherous eye. By inviting Adam to 'pluck' it out, she is evidently luring him to danger, for by doing so, he will look at her and die.

Adam's journey to Hell is obviously described in terms reminiscent of Dante's in the *Inferno*. It is significant that Thomas should have wanted to associate two tales of spiritual journey - *The Divine Comedy* and *L'île des pingouins* - to his own spiritual tale of a 'Christian voyage', as he himself describes the poem in Sonnet X. In *L'île des pingouins*, Saint Maël is lured by the Devil to an ice ocean where he encounters a white polar bear on an iceberg softly whispering Virgil's *Messianic Eclogue*. In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante goes on a pilgrimage through Hell and Purgatory accompanied by Virgil, and eventually reaches Paradise. The first line of the *Inferno* indicates that the spiritual journey happens, for Dante, '[m]idway along the journey of our life'<sup>ix</sup>; this is echoed in 'Altarwise by owl-light' where the action is described, in the poem's first line, as happening in 'the halfway-house'<sup>x</sup>. In 'Altarwise by owl-light', Adam is depicted as going to 'Inferno' across an ice ocean where the white bear is quoting Virgil's announcement of the birth of Christ. The possibility that the poem describes a spiritual journey, a 'Christian voyage', is supported by further images which recall Dante's *Inferno*.

The concept of the earth as divided into hemispheres pervades Thomas's poem as it does Dante's Canto XXXIV. As Dante's Satan fell from Heaven to the Southern Hemisphere, the land in terror retreated to the Northern Hemisphere. Satan has the upper part of his body in the Northern Hemisphere, the lower part in the Southern Hemisphere, and his middle part corresponds to the earth's centre. Virgil and Dante climb down and then up Satan's shaggy body, using it as a kind of ladder, of stairway, between the two hemispheres and in the direction of Heaven. In Sonnet III, Thomas's Satan appeared to be in the same position as Dante's, 'breast-deep in the descended bone'. The idea of a ladder to reach the opposite hemisphere is also present in the same sonnet:

We rung our weathering changes on the ladder,  
Said the antipodes, and twice spring chimed.  
(III, 13-14)

What we see, however, is a symbolic shift from Dante's initial image. The ladder of hemispheres is not used to leave Hell and go towards Heaven; it is a way of securing a second spring. In symbolical terms, the seasons represent various stages through life: spring is fresh life, whereas winter is death. To 'ring the weathering changes' is to substitute winter, which is death, with spring, which is fresh life. The ladder of hemispheres is, in Thomas, a ladder to earthly immortality. This is the opposite pole to Christianity, which promises spiritual immortality.

One more echo of Dante's geography of hemispheres begins to show us the form of this journey and brings us back to the question of why 'salt Adam' is being 'cross-stroked' to Hell. In Sonnet I, the tropics in each hemisphere are mentioned as the dwelling place of the gentleman:

I am the long world's gentleman, he said,  
And share my bed with Capricorn and Cancer.  
(I, 13-14)

Satan as depicted by Dante could claim to share his bed with the tropics for, as we saw, his body pierces the earth and spreads equally in both hemispheres. According to Dante, he is 'the fell Worm that pierces the world through'<sup>xi</sup>. In that sense, he could truthfully claim to be 'the long world's gentleman' and to share his bed with Capricorn and Cancer. This raises the possibility that, in Sonnet I, the gentleman is, in fact, dominantly the Devil. This would explain why, in Sonnet IV, the narrator asks him a question about the wind of his six wings.

Another allusion to Dante, later in the poem, also involves this geography of the hemispheres, and is interesting because, this time, it departs from the idea of the Devil in the *Inferno*, and describes the victory of Christianity in a fashion reminiscent of *Paradiso*. This, again, contributes to the understanding of 'Altarwise by owl-light' as a spiritual journey. In Sonnet VIII, a crucifixion is described, the outcome of which is that:

... the three-coloured rainbow ...  
From pole to pole leapt round the ... world.  
(VIII, 9-10)

H. H. Kleinman has already suggested that there is, here, a reference to *Paradiso*, where Dante describes the three-coloured rainbow of Trinity mirroring within him<sup>xii</sup>:

That light supreme, within its fathomless  
Clear substance, showed to me three spheres, which bare  
Three hues distinct, and occupied one space;

The first mirrored the next, as though it were  
Rainbow from rainbow, and the third seemed flame  
Breathed equally from each of the first pair.<sup>xiii</sup>

In Thomas's lines, the three-coloured rainbow of Trinity is arching 'from pole to pole'; the whole world, both the North and the South Hemispheres, have been won over by Christianity.

So what does this mean about the poem as a whole? And why is Adam going to Hell in Sonnet V? I suggest that the Christ-like side of the narrator, the 'gentleman of wounds' gradually becomes dominant over the Devil-side, the 'long world's gentleman'. This is why 'salt Adam' is being 'cross-stroked' to Hell. Virgil's *Messianic Eclogue* prefigures the entrance of Christ in the narrator's life. The end of the poem is largely about his progress to the possibility of Redemption. In that sense, the poem is very much the tale of a spiritual journey to Christianity, an initiatory progress from Satan to Christ, from the earthly to the spiritual.

In a 1938 letter to Treece, whose book on Thomas was being written, the poet famously wrote:

I hold a beast, an angel, and a madman in me, and my enquiry is as to their working, and my problem is their subjugation and victory, downthrow & upheaval, and my effort is their self-expression.<sup>xiv</sup>

'Altarwise by owl-light' could be one of the poems in which the 'subjugation and victory, downthrow & upheaval' of the 'beast' and the 'angel' is taking place. In this paper, I have suggested that the poem relates a spiritual journey to Christianity, where the beast or the Devil, as depicted in Dante's *Inferno*, takes hold of the narrator

at the start of the poem, but is eventually defeated, the poem ending in the victory of Christianity.

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## NOTES

<sup>i</sup>See Elder Olson, *The Poetry of Dylan Thomas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954); William York Tindall, *A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas* (New York: Octagon Books, 1962); Siobhán Parkinson, "Obscurity in the Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis: Trinity College, Dublin, 1982), p. 266; William T. Moynihan, *The Craft and Art of Dylan Thomas* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 112.

<sup>ii</sup>Parkinson describes line 13 as one of Thomas's most Surrealistic (p. 266), and Moynihan sees Sonnet V as a "Daliesque picture of a crucifixion" (p. 112).

<sup>iii</sup>Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems 1934-1953*, ed. Walford Davies and Ralph Maud (London: J. M. Dent, 1993), Sonnet V, ll. 11-14. In this article, I shall always use this edition.

<sup>iv</sup>Idem, p. 214.

<sup>v</sup>Clark Emery, *The World of Dylan Thomas* (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1962), pp. 232, 233.

<sup>vi</sup>Dante, *The Divine Comedy* (trans. Melville Best Anderson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), Canto XXXIV, 29. In this article, I shall use various editions of *The Divine Comedy* depending on the quality and clarity of their translation of particular lines.

<sup>vii</sup>*Ibid.*, 13-15.

<sup>viii</sup>Dante, *Inferno* (trans. Mark Musa, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), Canto XXXIV, 50-51.

<sup>ix</sup>*Inferno*, Canto I, 1.

<sup>x</sup>I owe this point to John Jesper.

<sup>xi</sup>*The Divine Comedy*, Canto XXXIV, 108.

<sup>xii</sup>H. H. Kleinman, *The Religious Sonnets of Dylan Thomas* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), p. 99.

<sup>xiii</sup>Dante, *Paradise* (trans. Dorothy L. Sayers and Barbara Reynolds, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), Canto XXXIII, 115-120.

<sup>xiv</sup>Paul Ferris, ed., *The Collected Letters of Dylan Thomas* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1985), p. 297.

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