

DYLAN THOMAS' "FERN HILL": A DESIRE TO REACH THE REAL FROM THE SYMBOLIC, A LACANIAN READING OF THE POEM.

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ABSTRACT

Like many other Romantic poets, Dylan Thomas glorifies childhood as an ideal stage of innocence and grace in his poetry which amounts to what Jacques Lacan would call a nostalgic desire for "the Real" from the "Symbolic realm" to regain lost past. Perhaps one of the most celebrated poems of Thomas on the theme of childhood as an ideal stage is "Fern Hill" which, if looked from Lacanian lens, attempts to recreate innocence and grace from intimations of his past glory. This study is an attempt to analyse as to how the poem with a charming opulent imagery overtones Thomas' sense of eternal loss and helps him sporadically satiate the longing or placate its intensity that continually itches and frustrates him.

Keywords: the Real, the Imaginary, the Symbolic, language, the Big Other, conscious and the unconscious, Desire

INTRODUCTION

As a neo-romantic in twentieth century poetry, Dylan Thomas is a great celebrator of the theme of childhood which has made his poetry visionary and mystical. Like Blake, Wordsworth and Vaughan who exalt angelic infancy to the state of an ideal realm is not less than a lost paradise or Eden for Thomas in which he frolicked with ease and spontaneity in all bounties of nature self-sufficiently. From a Lacanian perspective, the desire for the impossible i.e., "the lost object"ⁱ for fulfilling the lack is nostalgic as the loss can never be fully recovered in reality due to emptiness of language. Reminiscences of childhood expressed in language can help us only heal the desire transiently and partially to "touch the Happy Isles/And see the great [Nature] whom we knew" (Tennyson, "Ulysses"). The idea quite clicks with Lacanian desire for "the Real,"ⁱⁱ a state of *plenum* (something complete in itself) and "jouissance" (a French term for ecstatic enjoyment).

DISCUSSION

The narrator in Thomas' "Fern Hill" cast a glance at his early life of childhood that

recreates a state of innocence and holiness—something that reveals his aboriginal nature. The poet draws inspiration from the Fern Hill, a farmhouse of his aunt--Ann Jones located in a charming Welsh landscape in the country side and rich in childhood associations, symbolically serves as an anchorage to objectify his nostalgic feelings of regaining the lost paradise. This imaginative retreat of the poet seems in line with Lacanian concept of desire for "the Real." Psycho-analytically speaking, "the Real" in Lacan refers to the neo-natal state of undifferentiated self where the child is not only one with his mother but also with the environment. He knows no death, no time, no beginning, no end—in Thomas' terms he is "below a time" (Thomas, p. 159). The psychic split between the self and the other has not yet occurred; and the child has not yet reached to the stage of "cogito ergo sum." This state of ignorance is a bliss as, according to Traherne, he "seemed as one brought into the Estate of Innocence. All things were spotless and pure and glorious: yea, and infinitely mine, and joyful and precious. I knew not that there were any sins, or complaints or laws" (qtd. in

Ackerman, p. 122). How rapturously Thomas arrests the then self-contained and entirely satisfying state of grace splendour, and *jouissance* with bewitching imagery from the symbolic matrix. He says:

Now as I was young and easy under the
apple boughs
About the lilting house and happy as the
grass was green,
The night above the dingle starry
Time let me hail and climb
Golden in the heydays of his eyes,
And honoured among wagons I was
prince of the apple towns
And once below a time I lordly had the
trees and leaves
Trail with daisies and barley
Down the rivers of the windfall light.
(Thomas, p. 159)

The above passage overtly reveals the richness and self-saturated register of “the Real” or what we religiously call the eternal Garden of Eden. The “apple boughs,” the happy “lilting house” the “green... grass” the ease, “the apple towns” trees, leaves, rivers and windfalls of light all seem to symbolize “the Real.” The words like “prince” and “lordly” are worth noticing which convey a sense of all-ness, sufficiency and un-differentiation where the child is one with his mother and the external world around. The whole poem psychologically mirrors “the Real” for the reader. Such a world where there is no split between the self and the other. The relation is still dyadic; no gender differentiation; and no conscious mind which is torn between the opposites. It is all one and the same; no sense of mine and thine—all things belong to it (the child) who is the real owner. That is why the child is “honoured among wagons” and is “prince of the apple towns.” Nothing is alienated nor he feels alienated.

How great is the desire of the poet expressed to be transferred from the world of what Lacan terms “the Symbolic Order”ⁱⁱⁱ—a triadic world of time, language and desire rather than timeless, to a “carefree,” preverbal and saturated world of essential needs.^{iv} In “the Real” register the child has no sense of time; no nous of sunrise or sunset. Its regal activities are free from the chains of time as Thomas says, “Time let me play and be/Golden in the mercy of his means.” Which is why, in this state of immutability and invariability the “Sabbath rang slowly/In the pebbles of the holy streams.” As and when the dyadic relation is broken by the entry of father who imposes law and authority representing language and society/culture, triadic relations are established; a radicle split/lack occurs; sense of mutability and change/clock time is born; opposites begin to be sporadically realized, and the socio-symbolic world or what Lacan calls the “Big Other” is born.^v Antony Easthope says:

In the psychoanalytic account it is this split which makes human society possible. If there is no unconscious, then there can be no opposition between nature and culture. First, the split is necessary condition for the existence of culture and civilization since it means that all those violent, appetitive, anti-social drives—the infant, ‘like a fiend’, ‘piping loud’—can be relegated to another place, the unconscious (emphasis mine p.26).

The natural split that lowers the infancy in the Real to unconscious consequently gives birth to the “Desire”^{vi} of the Lost Object/Mother/lost Garden or Eden, i.e., realm of the Real. It is this yearning desire of the lost paradise which exerts its unique influence on the poet which continually

frustrates him in the Symbolic order that finds its voice in the language of poetry.

Although the desire to attain the Real fully, through symbolic substitutes, is impossible and delusive because the language is incomplete and helpless to catch the whole truth, yet the poet, by cherishing sweet reminiscences of the realm along the vale of years when time held him “green,” “easy” and “heedless,” sadly expresses it in the language of fantasy as there is no other way to express it. Lacan in an interview on the television once said:

I always speak the truth. Not the whole truth, because there’s no way, to say it all. Saying it all is literally impossible: words fail. Yet it’s through this very impossibility that the truth holds on to the real. (qtd. in Gounelas, p.4)

Reverberating his voice of desire, Thomas poetically reiterates to heal it in the last section of the poem:

Nothing I cared in the lamb
white days that time would take me
Up to the swallow thronged
loft by the shadow of my hand,
In the moon that is always
rising,
Nothing that riding to sleep
I should hear him fly with
the high fields
And wake to the farm
forever fled from the childless land,
Oh as I was young and easy
in the mercy of his means,
Time held me green and
dying
Though I sang in my chains
like the sea. (Thomas, p.160-61)

The underlined phrases in the above passage overtly reveal the shackled and dogmatic codes and structure of the Symbolic world suggesting lack, and in turn the desire to fill the lack or regain the lost blissful state where the child is not yet a slave to chains and manacles of the Symbolic order but is still capable to tasting beauty and pleasure unencumbered by cerebral control, reason, and incompleteness and emptiness of language.

CONCLUSION

Dylan Thomas enacts a remarkable poetic drama of his childhood in which he gives an excursion to his long cherished memories that helps him heal his continually simmering desire to reach the Real—something like our primordial state and origin where we relax all rigid subjectivity of the signifying chains of the socio-Symbolic order and see ourselves not as grown up, grudging and differentiated in the “childless land” of adults but as children “green”, “easy” and “carefree”—in all oneness and togetherness. The Romantics’ yearning for the early childhood basically aims to achieve this goal. Their conscious effort to connect past with the present, the undifferentiated self with the differentiated-self, the real with the symbolic realm, and the conscious with the unconscious helps them psychologically revive and spiritually regenerate in order to become more productive and useful individuals of the Big Other.

Notes

ⁱ The ‘lost object’ from Lacanian perspective could be anything but is usually the mother. When dyadic relation between the mother and child is broken, the object is lost. It is this ‘lost object’ which we try to regain throughout our lives in the symbolic realm. For detail see Ruth Parkin Gounelas. “Lost Object” *Literature and Psychoanalysis*.

ⁱⁱ “The Real” in Lacan refers to the preverbal stage of undifferentiated-self outside the subject. This concept refers to the state of nature from where we have been forever severed by our entry into language. The child is one with the mother and is not yet aware of his/her subjectivity. In this stage the child’s thinking-self is not yet born. The stage is like paradise for the child whose all needs are fulfilled. For detail see Lacan. “Mirror Stage as Formative Function of the I”, Lacan: *Ecrits: a Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. (London and New York: Routledge: 1977). Jeremy Hawthorn. *A Glossary of Cotemporary Literary Theory*. (London and New York: Arnold, 2000).

ⁱⁱⁱ Generally speaking, an entry into Symbolic order makes the child acquire subjectivity, and he/she becomes a full-fledged subject. The Symbolic order is a register of language, culture, society, and law that succeeds the Imaginary realm; and which Lacan refers collectively to the Big Other. For detail see Lacan’s “Mirror Stage,” Easthope’s “The Unconscious and the ‘I’” in Antony Easthope, *The Unconscious*.

^{iv} It would not be inappropriate to say that a Romantic poet John Keats perhaps refers to the same world of “the Real” suggested by the carefree and painless world of Nightingale in contrast with

the real wearisome and anxious world of the “Symbolic Order” when he addresses the Nightingale in his well-known Ode and says:

Fade far away dissolve and quite forget
 What thou among the leaves hast never known,
 The weariness, the fever and the fret
 Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
 Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
 Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
 Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
 And leaden -eyed despairs,
 Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes ,
 Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.
 (Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale” ll. 21-30)

^v I am using this term theoretically from Lacanian perspective. “The Other” when written with capital “O” refers to the culture/language/society which belongs to the symbolic realm-- that which brought us into being as subjects. For detail see Antony Easthope. *The Unconscious*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1999). Pp. 59-69; and Lacan’s well-known psychoanalytic theory of “The Mirror Stage as Formative Function of the I.

^{vi} The term “Desire” I am using in a Lacanian sense which Antony Easthope explains as “an unconscious search for the lost object , lost not because it is in front of desire waiting to be refound but because it is already behind desire and producing it in the first place” (p. 97). Please read for detail Antony Easthope, *The Unconscious*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1999). Pp.92-97.

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