

Dylan Thomas and the French Symbolists

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In the first volume of *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays* (1995), M. Wynn Thomas published an essay which called attention to the existence of a generation of Welsh poets who were drawn to the Symbolist aesthetic. This generation included Vernon Watkins, Euros Bowen and - most prominently - Dylan Thomas, and the essay pointed to Bowen's argument that "Thomas was not, as was commonly supposed, a Welsh poet writing in an English tradition, but rather a Welsh poet whose work was European in character".¹ As Bowen and Watkins were both translators of the French Symbolists, to find the influence of French Symbolism in their verse is scarcely surprising. The issue of an influence from France is much more unexpected in the case of Dylan Thomas whose knowledge of French was non-existent,² and who is still largely - and perhaps wrongly - perceived as lacking in erudition. French Symbolism could only have come to him through translations or works of criticism in English, or at second hand. And yet, in the works of this poet who once referred to himself as "the Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive",³ a number of fundamental elements suggest an influence from the Continent. Thomas's use of aesthetic devices characteristic of French Symbolism, as well as his vision of the poet as a translator of the written language of nature, make his relationship to Symbolism a pressing issue. This paper examines the question of French influence on Thomas, the extent of the Welsh poet's interest in the French Symbolists, how he gained access to their ideas and works, and how this manifests itself in his poetry. At the same time, it considers possibilities of English influence, aspects of Symbolism which Thomas could have arrived at through the English tradition, and the possible influence of English-language Symbolists.

It is clear that Thomas was very familiar with some of the French Symbolists, and his interest in them was biographical as well as aesthetic. For a while, in the early 1930s, a number of poets were particularly present in his thoughts. He wrote about Baudelaire and Verlaine in an article for the *South Wales Evening Post* in January 1933.⁴ In a May 1933 letter to Trevor Hughes, he mentioned Nerval, Baudelaire and Verlaine.⁵ He referred to Verlaine again in a letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson in the October of that year,⁶ and he wrote of Rimbaud twice, in letters to Glyn Jones and to Hansford Johnson, in March and May 1934.⁷ His interest in the French Symbolists appears to have been at its most intense for just over a year, but this coincided exactly with what was by far the most creative period in his career. Moreover, some of the comments he made about three of these poets, Nerval, Verlaine and Rimbaud, suggest that this interest was not merely superficial.

Indeed, it is particularly striking that Thomas should have referred to Nerval in 1933, since the poet had not been widely studied in the English-speaking world by the early thirties, and little attention was devoted to him in that decade.⁸ Apart from Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, published in 1899, which included a chapter on Nerval, and a 1929 book by Peter Quennell entitled *Baudelaire and the Symbolists*, which also included an essay on Nerval, little had been written on the poet.⁹ T. S. Eliot had quoted the line "Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie" from "El Desdichado" in the original French in *The Waste Land*, and Thomas might have discovered Nerval there, but he knew more about Nerval than *The Waste Land* alone would have allowed him to discover. He included him in a list of "dark-eyed" poets, which consisted of "Poe & Thompson, Nerval & Baudelaire, Rilke and Verlaine".¹⁰ By "dark-eyed", Thomas was probably alluding to a sombre nature shared by these poets. He was obviously aware of this side of Nerval's writings and personality. Equally surprising is the fact that in the October 1933 letter to Hansford Johnson, Thomas included Verlaine in his list of landmark poets, alongside Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe, Blake, John Donne and Yeats.¹¹ The list itself is particularly revealing, beginning with three standards of European literature, to which Thomas added three of his favourite poets, thus implying that he regarded these as ranking among the greatest. It is slightly odd that Verlaine should also figure in this list, suggesting that Thomas knew enough about the poet to find him worthy of admiration, and that he was interested in the poet's ideas or works. Of course, Thomas could have simply looked up poets he was curious about in *The Encyclopedia Britannica*. His 1933 article for the *South Wales Evening Post* entitled "Genius and Madness Akin in World of Art",¹² describing the tenebrous lives of a number of artists, including Verlaine and Baudelaire, is clearly a summary of the encyclopedia's entries, using the same facts and almost the same words:

Paul Verlaine, the greatest lyric writer France has produced, who spent his last days in the most sordid poverty, wandering between hospitals and cafés, was one of the strangest men in the history of literature. The author of "Flowers of Evil", Charles Baudelaire, the enfant terrible of French literature, led a mad, exotic life in India and Paris. His unwholesome, and yet brilliant, work was cried down by his contemporaries, and many of his poems were banned. He resorted to opium; drank to excess; and died when aged 46, crippled with paralysis.¹³

Arthur Symons was credited as the author of the entry for Verlaine which Thomas had consulted. Surprisingly, *The Encyclopedia Britannica* had an entry for Nerval as early as 1911, possibly accounted for by the fact that Symons was a

contributor, so Thomas may have learned about Nerval's life and character there. But for him to place Verlaine alongside Shakespeare and Dante, he had to have more authoritative knowledge of the French poet's works; he must have read him. In the same way, Thomas's interest in Rimbaud is not to be underestimated, since he knew enough about him to be able to describe Rimbaud's obscurity in some detail in a March 1934 letter to Glyn Jones:

[O]thers, again, like Rimbaud, have introduced exclusively personal symbols and associations, so that reading him and his satellites, we feel as though we were intruding into a private party in which nearly every sentence has a family meaning that escapes us . . .¹⁴

Thomas obviously had a precise idea of the French poet's writing style and his comment makes it clear that he had actually read him.

It has, in fact, often been argued that - among the Symbolists - Thomas was not only particularly interested in Rimbaud, but also influenced by the myth surrounding the French poet as well as by his works. Thomas had, after all, memorably described himself as "the Rimbaud of Cwmdonkin Drive" in a 1941 letter to Vernon Watkins. But the significance of this sobriquet may, of course, have been blown out of proportion by critics. In a 1952 talk, Thomas himself claimed not to "understand what some people mean when they say I have been influenced by Rimbaud".¹⁵ However, there have been interesting discussions on the question, largely dominated by the debate over the possible influence of "Le Bateau ivre" on "Ballad of the Long-Legged Bait", a poem which Thomas finished a month before referring to himself as a Rimbaud. Thomas read *New Verse*, and Norman Cameron, who was a friend of his, had published a translation of Rimbaud's poem in that periodical in 1936.¹⁶ Several studies have also suggested that Thomas had read Edgell Rickword's *Rimbaud: the Boy and the Poet* (1924), which contains a translation of over half of "Le Bateau ivre". Martin Dodsworth and Terrence Pratt have specifically shown how Rickword's book could have inspired some of Thomas's poems.¹⁷ The Rickword source had originally been suggested by Constantine FitzGibbon who was convinced that the myth of the young Rimbaud, drunk and dissolute, had a hold on Thomas's imagination.¹⁸ The Welsh poet may, in fact, even have tried to look like Rimbaud, the resemblance being noted by both Geoffrey Grigson and John Davenport, who saw Thomas as an "explosive mixture of Rimbaud and Verlaine".¹⁹

The question, then, is how Thomas discovered a group of poets who obviously captured his imagination during what was to be the most creative period of his career. FitzGibbon proposed that Thomas's childhood friend Daniel Jones - who was well-read in European literature - had introduced Thomas to foreign writers, and to Rickword's book on Rimbaud.²⁰ This is very plausible; Jones himself wrote later that his literary friendship with Thomas involved, beside their writing collaboration, discussions, critical comments on each other's poems, and interchange of books.²¹ Thomas had a similar friendship with Vernon Watkins, whom he first met in early 1935. Watkins was also well-versed in European literature and translated a number of German, Italian and French poets, including several of the Symbolists. However, by the time he first met Watkins, Thomas already knew Nerval, Verlaine, Rimbaud and Baudelaire, and was, as we shall see, no stranger to Symbolism.²² Gwen Watkins wrote that Vernon Watkins introduced Thomas to some poets not known to him, especially French and German ones,²³ among whom may well have been Valéry, one of the poets Watkins translated. Thomas once told the critic William York Tindall that, for "Le Cimetière marin", he "ranked Valéry with Yeats and Joyce".²⁴ On the other hand, Thomas may simply have read Cecil Day Lewis's translation of Valéry's poem in 1946, or even heard it on the Third Programme of the B.B.C. in January 1947 (he may also have come across the 1932 translation of it). In any case, apart from a vague thematic resemblance between "Le Cimetière marin" and "In the White Giant's Thigh",²⁵ Valéry does not appear to have been a major influence on Thomas. His interest in Symbolism was clearly concentrated in the 1933-34 period and revolved around a small group of poets only. It is most likely that he discovered these through Daniel Jones.

It is also highly plausible that Thomas gained access to the Symbolists through Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), which had popularised the notion of Symbolism in Britain.²⁶ By 1930, T. S. Eliot could argue that the Symbolists "are now as much in our bones as Shakespeare or Donne",²⁷ a comment made around the time when Thomas was beginning his career as a poet. Thomas knew of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, for it is discussed in Eliot's "The Perfect Critic", which he had read; in a 1934 letter, he refers to Rémy de Gourmont's theory of "impressions erected into laws",²⁸ the very phrase quoted in French as the epigraph of the first part of "The Perfect Critic", where it is discussed. It was also from "The Perfect Critic" that Thomas must have borrowed his idea, expressed in a letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson in October 1933, of comparing a formless poem to "a canvas" on which "a painter had flung a great mass of colours", leaving the "placing, dividing and forming" of it to his critics.²⁹ Eliot's essay could well have encouraged Thomas to read *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. Symons's book dealt directly with the Symbolists themselves (with the notable exception of Baudelaire) and would have allowed Thomas to get as close to the French poets as would be possible for someone who could not read French. Any influence would have been almost direct. And, indeed, one particular theory of language, found in Symons's chapter on Verlaine, would seem to endorse the view that Thomas read Symons's book. Symbolism had encouraged the notion that words were objects in themselves, existing independently of their referential meaning. In the Verlaine chapter, Symons pushes the idea further by attributing life, selfhood and autonomy to words:

It is part of his simplicity, his divine childishness, that he abandons himself, at times, to the song which words begin to sing in the air. . . He knows that words are living things, which we have not created, and which go their way without demanding of us the right to live. . . They transform themselves for him into music, colour and shadow.³⁰

Recalling his own experience of words in early childhood, Thomas likewise concludes that words have life, selfhood and autonomy, and, although there is no exact verbal echo of Symons' text, the sense is the same. The relevant passage occurs in a letter of 1951, where Thomas is answering the questions of a student about how he became a poet:

[T]he shape and shade and size and noise of words as they hummed, strummed, jiggled and galloped along. That was the time of innocence. . . words were their springlike selves, fresh with Eden's dew, as they flew out of the air.³¹

Thomas also refers to "the colours the words cast on my eyes" in these early days and to the primary importance of the "sound" of words as opposed to what they "stood for, symbolized or meant".³² This is an idea which he had already expressed in the poem "Once it was the colour of saying".

Moreover, in Symons's chapter on Rimbaud, another example of the attribution of colour to words could even be conceivably the origin of Thomas's comment that Rimbaud's obscurity was founded on "exclusively personal symbols and associations" and "a family meaning that escapes us". Symons quotes the sonnet "Voyelles" in which Rimbaud attributes a colour to each vowel. The quotation is in the original French, but Symons translates parts of Rimbaud's "Alchimie du Verbe" which deals with the same idea :

I have invented the colour of the vowels: A, black; E, white; I, red; O, blue; U, green. I regulated the form and the movement of every consonant, and, with instinctive rhythms, I flattered myself that I had invented a poetic language accessible, one day or another, to every shade of meaning. I reserved to myself the right of translation.³³

In the second edition of his book in 1908, Symons introduces the idea that, as a child, Rimbaud must have owned a certain coloured spelling book, which could have been the poem's starting point. Indeed, apart from the letter E which is yellow, all the other vowels in that book have the exact colours that Rimbaud attributed to them, and some of Rimbaud's images associated with the vowels in the sonnet are apparently very close to the illustrative pictures around the letters in the book.³⁴ This searching of Rimbaud's life for means of illuminating his poetry may have been in Thomas's mind when he wrote about the French poet's "personal symbols" and "family meaning".

Here, we can begin to see how the circumstantial evidence of Thomas's interest in the Symbolists is supported by aesthetic elements in the poet's works. Two characteristic devices of French Symbolism can be identified in some of Thomas's poems: suggestion of mood and use of synaesthesia. Walford Davies has already described how "We lying by seasand" (originally written in May 1933 and revised in 1937),³⁵ for instance, is characterised by a "world-weary *Symboliste* music" and displays "the *Symboliste* trick of promoting an aetherial effect by muting the tangibility of things and rhythms".³⁶ And indeed, one element of Symbolism included the suggestion rather than the statement of emotions, the attempt to convey a feeling through a text that does not discuss that feeling, coupled with an emphasis on the use of the sonorities of language ("De la musique avant toute chose!", wrote Verlaine in "Art poétique") to create a mood, an atmosphere. "We lying by seasand" certainly achieves a languorous, melancholy tone through the repeated use of long syllables, and the sonorous quality of the poem is enhanced by the accumulation of assonances. The atmosphere of world-weariness that this creates is sustained further by the referential vagueness of the text, its impressionistic lack of focus or precision. In the notion of "watching yellow", for instance, attention to the precise object that is being watched is occluded, to allow an indefinite impression to come to the foreground. Certainly, the first idea that springs to mind is that "yellow" refers to the dominant colour of the expanse of sand surrounding those "lying by seasand", but there is a definite shift of emphasis between the idea of 'watching the yellow sand' and that of "watching yellow", suggesting that the colour is the meaningful element in the vision. The fact that "yellow" occurs four times in the poem also stresses its importance in the vision, perhaps because of the feeling yellowness can suggest: nausea, sickness, tiredness, boredom... The approximate repetition of the first line ("We lying by seasand, watching yellow") in lines 18 and 19 ("we lie, / Watch yellow") and in line 23 ("Lie watching yellow") creates a refrain-like effect. But the most Symbolist aspect of the poem is to be found in these repetitive lines that hold no referential interest but that play on sounds, such as "For in this yellow grave of sand and sea . . . / That's grave and gay as grave and sea" and "Of the grave, gay, seaside land" (ll. 5, 7, 17), or "A calling for colour calls" (l. 6).

Coloured audition, another typically Symbolist concept, was not foreign to Thomas. We saw that, in 1951, he described how words used to "cast" colours on his eyes, in the innocent days of his childhood when meaning was not a prime concern to him. The same experience is apparently described in the poem "Once it was the colour of saying" (thought to have originally been written between July 1932 and January 1933),³⁷ where the idea of "a word of many shades" is also reminiscent of that deliberate confusion of the arts (poetry, music and painting) cultivated by the Symbolists, and of their impressionistic emphasis on nuance, on the conveying of "the fine shades of feeling".³⁸ Coloured audition - found in both Rimbaud and Thomas - is an example of synaesthesia, or sense transference. It is a technique widely used by Baudelaire

(and was subsequently very popular among the Symbolists) and it is in relation to Baudelaire, rather than Rimbaud, that Thomas comes closest to the Symbolist ethos. In the celebrated poem "Correspondances", Baudelaire described a spiritual world as a unified realm of perfection in which, sounds, fragrances and colours answer to each other, correspond to each other, "echo" each other:

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,
Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants . . .³⁹

There, perfumes are fresh like the skin of children, soft like the music of oboes and green like meadows. The sense of smell is transferred to touch, hearing and sight. We find something very similar in Thomas's poetry. In "When all my five and country senses" (thought to belong originally to the period between July 1932 and January 1933),⁴⁰ for instance, the poet imagines a state where the five senses have the faculty of sight: the "fingers", the "whispering ears", the "lynx tongue" - a tongue with the acute eyesight of the lynx - and the "nostrils", so that there are "five eyes". In "From love's first fever", Thomas seems to develop further the Baudelairean concept of a unity of sensations in the unified world of perfection which, Thomas believes, one knew before birth when "All world was one, one windy nothing" (l. 6). Here, synaesthesia is used to suggest the gradual awakening of sensation in the unborn child in the womb: "And the four winds, that had long blown as one, / Shone in my ears the light of sound, / Called in my eyes the sound of light" (ll. 20-22).

Thomas's poem "Especially when the October wind" is also very close to Baudelaire's own aesthetics as expounded in the poem "Correspondances" and in his prose. Baudelaire sees the visible world, the world of sensations, as only the reflection of the essential world. He believes that there is a deeper world, beyond the world of appearances, which needs to be deciphered, interpreted. In "Correspondances", an analogy is established between "Nature" and a "temple", a temple being the mere visible façade of a much grander and invisible spiritual world. To man, the world of appearances only delivers what seems like "confuses paroles" (confused words) and "forêts de symboles" (forests of symbols). The role of the poet is to *translate*, to *decipher*, the hieroglyphs, the symbols. Baudelaire builds his idea of the poet's role from Swedenborg's doctrine of correspondences:

D'ailleurs Swedenborg. . . nous avait déjà enseigné. . . que tout, forme, mouvement, nombre, couleur, parfum, dans le *spirituel* comme dans le *naturel*, est significatif, réciproque, converse, *correspondant*. Si nous étendons la démonstration... nous arrivons à cette vérité que tout est hiéroglyphique, et nous savons que les symboles ne sont obscurs que d'une manière relative, c'est-à-dire selon la pureté, la bonne volonté ou la clairvoyance native des âmes. Or qu'est-ce qu'un poète (je prends le mot dans son acception la plus large), si ce n'est un traducteur, un déchiffreur?⁴¹

In "Especially when the October wind", the idea that the poet's role is to decipher the "confuses paroles" issued by the world of appearances, the natural world, seems to be central to the argument of the poem. Moreover, the image of the "forêts de symboles" appears to be echoed in:

Some let me make you of the vowel'd beeches,
Some of the oaken voices, from the roots
Of many a thorny shire tell you notes,
Some let me make you of the water's speeches.
(ll. 13-16)

Throughout the poem, the poet proposes to interpret the 'tongue' of nature. The implied belief in the poem is that there is something beyond the façade of the world of objects. The poet, a 'maker', wants to "make" something of it.

For both Baudelaire and Thomas the role of the poet is that of an interpreter of nature, a type of seer who, thanks to the native sensitiveness of his soul (according to Baudelaire), is able to see beyond the façade. In a 1933 letter, Thomas said he was not interested in merely expressing what people had already felt before, but wanted to "rip something away and show what they have never seen".⁴² And, in another letter of the same year, Thomas recalled an experience which reveals that the idea of the poet as interpreter was, in the early years, fully present in his mind:

I found . . . the vast horseplay of the sky to be a vaster symbol. It was as if the night were crying, crying out the terrible explanation of itself. On all sides of me, under my feet, above my head, the symbols moved, all waiting in vain to be translated. The trees that night were like prophet's fingers. What had been a fool in the sky was the wisest cloud of all - a huge, musical ghost thumping out one, coded tune. It was a sage of a night . . .⁴³

In several poems, Thomas presents himself as a visionary who sees beyond life.⁴⁴ In "I fellowed sleep", for instance, he describes a dream where he leaves the earth and reaches an ethereal plane, which is apparently peopled by angels. The vision experienced by the poet in his sleep is described in terms of a deep waking, contrasted with the light sleeping that characterises the evanescent, imperfect knowledge gained through ordinary human channels. Thus, the sleeping poet enters through his vision into a world of deeper wakefulness, much as Thomas had hoped when he had written that he wanted to look upon his sleeping "as only another waking".⁴⁵ And he is able to articulate his insight, his vision, in terms of his role as a poet:

Then all the matter of the living air
Raised up a voice, and, climbing on the words,
I spelt my vision with a hand and hair,
How light the sleeping on this soily star,
How deep the waking in the worlded clouds.
(ll. 21-25)

Nature, it seems, has transformed itself into a gigantic discourse on which the poet can climb as he climbed on the clouds. In other words, he sees reflected in nature the expression of a deep meaning, which he then undertakes to spell, to write down, or perhaps to paint ("with a hand and hair").

Thomas shared with Baudelaire the belief that the poet was a translator of the hieroglyphics of nature. Consequently, an influence from the French poet cannot be ruled out; but the ideas of the poet as visionary and of nature as language were not particular to Baudelaire. Thomas came across them in his own culture and may, on his own, have formed the idea of the poet as interpreter of this language. He once wrote of "I fellowed sleep" that "[o]nly superficially is it the most visionary".⁴⁶ To him, vision seemed to represent an important part of the poet's activity. It is as if he wanted to convey the unknown, the unseen; as if, through his extraordinary insight, he wanted to bring back and disclose certain secrets. This was, to some extent, a Symbolist endeavour, but the idea of the visionary gift of the poet is also an element of Celtic tradition, where the bard is considered to be a "singer and seer".⁴⁷ Yeats too saw himself as a poet of visionary experience, finding in Celtic mythology, in the supernatural world of fairies, and in Rosicrucianism, a supply of symbols to speak of the invisible. Richard Ellmann writes that, as a young poet, Yeats wished to write poems "of insight and knowledge", and that "the first fascination of symbolism was that it did not altogether disclose the secrets upon which its use depended".⁴⁸ Ellmann tends towards a psychoanalytical interpretation of Yeats's desire to write the poetry of a visionary, but Yeats, like Thomas, was part of a culture where the poet had traditionally been a seer, and he may have wanted to re-enact this bardic function. This might also be why Yeats felt a certain affinity with the French Symbolism that endeavoured to see beyond the world of appearances. Yeats had a very similar background to Baudelaire's, since he knew of the doctrine of correspondences through his readings of Swedenborg and Boehme.⁴⁹ In an essay on Yeats and Symbolism, Tindall insists that Yeats was, in fact, a Symbolist before he had ever heard of French Symbolism, having evolved his theories partly from Blake, Shelley and Rossetti, but mostly from Swedenborg, Boehme and Eliphas Lévi, the very same thinkers who had influenced Baudelaire and Rimbaud.⁵⁰ Thus, Tindall explains, "[w]hen Symons and others told him about the French poets, Yeats welcomed them as fellow travellers on the road he was following, as fellow transcendentalists and occultists who had, like Blake and Shelley, hit upon symbolism as the only possible way to express what they had experienced".⁵¹

For Thomas, the process would have been slightly different in that he does not appear to have had first hand knowledge of Swedenborg, Boehme, Lévi and their doctrines. Nevertheless, Thomas, like Yeats, was perhaps a Symbolist before discovering French Symbolism. That there is a striking resemblance between Baudelaire's "forêt de symboles" and Thomas's "vowelled beeches" and "oaken voices" in "Especially when the October wind" is incontestable, but this could be purely coincidental.⁵² Many poets in British literature have also seen nature as the mere reflection of the spiritual world, an idea as old as Plato's philosophy of Ideas. Moreover, Swedenborg had been quite influential at the end of the eighteenth century and during the first half, at least, of the nineteenth, so that the doctrine of correspondences (previously expounded by Paracelsus and Boehme) was relatively widespread. Poets such as Blake and Donne made use of it and Thomas came across it in their works. The former, whom Thomas greatly admired,⁵³ was - if only for a short time - enthusiastic about many aspects of the thought of Swedenborg and, like Baudelaire, Blake took the doctrine of correspondences as one element of this influence, accepting it "all the more readily because it is identical with the 'Astronomia' of Paracelsus and with the 'Signatures' of Boehme". In "Vision of the Last Judgment", for example, Blake could write that "[t]here Exist in the Eternal World the Permanent Realities of Every Thing we see reflected in this Vegetable Glass of Nature". He regarded the world of nature as corresponding to the eternal world, being a mere ephemeral reflection of it. However, we saw that Baudelaire drew from the Swedenborgian doctrine the idea of a correspondence from the spiritual to the natural in terms of hieroglyphics - a concept which is manifest in Thomas's work, but non-existent in Blake's. Thomas also sees the world of nature as corresponding to the spiritual world, but not as a mere reflection; his interest clearly lies in the sign as such, in nature as the signature (in the literal sense), a language, of the spiritual world. Nature itself becomes a linguistic link between the eternal world and man. Thus, in the poem "In

the beginning", he develops the concept of a nature inscribed with signs:

In the beginning was the pale signature,
Three-syllabled and starry as the smile;
And after came the imprints on the water,
Stamp of the minted face upon the moon;
The blood that touched the crosstree and the grail
Touched the first cloud and left a sign.
(ll. 7-12)

Here, the idea is advanced of the spiritual world leaving its permanent "stamp" on nature. Thomas, like Blake, describes nature as a copy, a "pale" imitation, of the eternal world, but his focus is directed towards the expressiveness of it, towards its semiotic quality. And we see in "In the beginning", just as in "I fellowed sleep", that it is the process of reading the signs of nature as though they were words, that allows him to penetrate the spiritual sphere. This vision of nature as language is illustrated by the place Thomas allots to words, "letters", and "characters" in his description of the Creation:

In the beginning was the word, the word
That from the solid bases of the light
Abstracted all the letters of the void;
And from the cloudy bases of the breath
The word flowed up, translating to the heart
First characters of birth and death.
(ll. 19-24)

Thomas has taken the concept of signatures quite literally, by seeing nature not only as a reflection of the eternal world but almost as a surface on which the word of God is written. This concept is developed throughout his poetry. In "Altarwise by owl-light", for instance, the poet imagines "the Lord's Prayer on a grain of rice, / A Bible-leaved of all the written woods . . . / Genesis in the root, the scarecrow word, / And one light's language in the book of trees" (VII, ll. 1-5). And in poems of the later period, such as "Over Sir John's hill", he describes how "I open the leaves of the water at a passage / Of psalms and shadows among the pincer'd sandcrabs prancing" (ll. 23-4). Again, in "Poem in October" he talks of "the parables / Of sun light" (ll. 48-9). In "Poem in October", nature seems to be actively expressing the word of God with its "heron / Priested shore", and the "water praying" (ll. 3-4, 6).

Donne influenced Thomas's imagery in many ways, and it seems that from him Thomas acquired one aspect of the doctrine of correspondences which forms the basis of an important part of his symbolism. Thomas writes that his "obscurity is . . . based, as it is, on a preconceived symbolism derived . . . from the cosmic significance of the human anatomy".⁵⁵ This could be related to Donne's idea that "Even in the body of man, you may turne to the whole world; This body is an Illustration of all Nature".⁵⁶ Not only does some of Thomas's imagery seem to originate directly in the vision of man as a little world, but more importantly, much of Thomas's symbolism can, indeed, be described in terms of a transcendental correspondence between the world of the human body and the spiritual world. For instance, in "A saint about to fall", where it seems that the mother's womb corresponds to heaven, the nutritious fluid of the placenta to manna, and the birth of a child to the fall of a saint from heaven, Thomas reads a spiritual meaning into the body and the natural phenomenon of birth. Or again, in "Altarwise by owl-light", for instance, it seems that the bone and blades of the spine and ribs of the standing man are meant to remind one of Jacob's ladder to heaven.

In Thomas, however, the doctrine of correspondences as found in Blake or Donne acquires a specifically Symbolist dimension in that the poet sets out to interpret the correspondences, to see through them, to *read* nature as the symbol of something else. And Thomas could have arrived at this Symbolism on his own. This would make him a British Symbolist in his own right, rather than someone who was creatively borrowing from the French Symbolists. But when he discovered the French Symbolists, early in his writing career, he must have recognised in some of their views beliefs that he himself held, which would explain why he was drawn to this movement. As we saw, he made use of certain concepts that were specific to the French Symbolists, such as suggestion of mood, coloured audition and synaesthesia in general. Moreover, two of his contemporaries (Yeats, through his use of doctrine, and Eliot, through verbal practice and theory of meaning) were very much Symbolists themselves, and Thomas could feel at ease within the same tradition. It is, in fact, probably through them that he received the biggest legacy of French Symbolism. Indeed, one of the most baffling aspects of Thomas's early poetry - its obscurity - is most certainly a consequence of ideas developed by French Symbolism. In 1962, referring to Thomas as "the Mallarmé of Glamorganshire", Tindall suggested that Thomas's "disarrangement" of words through unorthodox syntax could be seen as a way of renewing "the language of the tribe", as Mallarmé once thought poets should do.⁵⁷ Tindall was touching on a fundamental element of Thomas's poetry, the disruption of traditional language structure, which often led to extreme ambiguity and a re-evaluation of meaning in poetry. The Symbolist attitude perceptible in this questioning of the function of language in poetry has been remarked upon by Walford Davies. Davies draws attention to the fact that Thomas started to write his first serious poetry around 1930, a time when "Symbolist irreducibility" as displayed in some of Eliot's poems, "must have brought about a radical change in what a young poet .

. . . now considered permissible".⁵⁸ Davies, however, is not convinced that Thomas is a Symbolist as such, but considers that he might have benefited from "an awareness of new kinds of structural freedom" brought out by Symbolism.⁵⁹ He also believes that if there was a Symbolist influence in Thomas, it is "the legacy of Symboliste method in Yeats or Eliot that probably counted".⁶⁰ It is certainly to Eliot that Thomas turned whenever he needed to justify his own obscurity. Repeatedly, he quoted Eliot's theory of meaning, which extended the Symbolist idea that language in poetry was more than a mere referential tool. Mallarmé had even shown, with "Un coup de dés" - a poem which draws a parallel between poetry and concert music - that poetry could dispense altogether with meaning in the traditional sense, and that language could be self-referential. This notion of language in poetry, which runs through Symbolism and on to the high Modernism that Eliot practised, was also endorsed by Thomas: "Are you obscure? But, yes, all good modern poetry is bound to be obscure. Remember Eliot . . ."⁶¹

Thomas's relation to French Symbolism is many-faceted. The poet was clearly interested in the Symbolists in the early 1930s, the most productive period of his life, and he did not need any knowledge of French to discover the lives, poetry and ideas of the Symbolist poets since he had access to books of criticism and translations, and in particular, to the works of Symons, Quennell and Rickword. His poetry displays characteristics that cannot fail to suggest the influence of the Symbolists, including coloured audition and, more generally, synaesthesia. These are, however, only minor points of comparison. Much more important is the belief held strikingly in common by Thomas and Baudelaire that the role of the poet is as translator of the hieroglyphics of nature. But Thomas may have arrived at it through routes similar to Baudelaire's, rather than through Baudelaire; and in that sense he could be seen as a British Symbolist in his own right. In the end, therefore, it is probably the Symbolist attitude to meaning in poetry, gained from Eliot and Yeats, that represents Thomas's biggest heritage from France.

NOTES

- 1 M. Wynn Thomas, "Hidden Attachments: aspects of the relationship between the two literatures of modern Wales" in *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays I* (1995), p. 160.
- 2 See Dylan Thomas, *The Collected Letters*, ed. Paul Ferris (London: Dent, 1985), pp. 205, 675. All quotations from Thomas's letters are from this edition, abbreviated as *Coll. Lett.*
- 3 *Coll. Lett.*, p. 487.
- 4 Dylan Thomas, *Early Prose Writings*, ed. Walford Davies (London: Dent, 1971), pp. 122-124.
- 5 *Coll. Lett.*, p. 17.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 98, 138-9.
- 8 See John W. Kneller, "An Approach to *Aurélia*" in Gérard de Nerval, *Aurélia ou le rêve et la vie*, ed. Jean Richer with the collaboration of John W. Kneller et al. (Paris: Minard, 1965), p. 345.
- 9 Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: Constable, 2nd ed., 1908), pp. 10-36, and Peter Quennell, *Baudelaire and the Symbolists* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1929), pp. 66-98. Thomas got to know Peter Quennell personally from at least 1937, but there is nothing to suggest that he had read him in 1933 (see *Coll. Lett.*, p. 258). The book, however, included essays and reviews that had appeared in *The Criterion*, *Life and Letters* and *The New Statesman*, increasing the likelihood of Thomas having come across certain aspects of it.
- 10 *Coll. Lett.*, p. 17.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 12 Thomas, *Early Prose Writings*, pp. 122-4.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- 14 *Coll. Lett.*, p. 98.
- 15 Dylan Thomas, "I Am Going to Read Aloud", in *London Magazine* (September, 1956), p. 14.
- 16 See, in particular, Derek Stanford, *Dylan Thomas: a literary study* (London: Neville Spearman, 1954), p. 119; W. Y. Tindall, *The Literary Symbol* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), p. 155; Glauco Cambon, "Two Crazy Boats: Dylan Thomas and Rimbaud" in *English Miscellany*, VII (1956), pp. 251-9; John Bayley, *The Romantic Survival* (London: Constable, 1957), p. 222; T. H. Jones, *Dylan Thomas* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1963), p. 79; Ralph Maud, *Entrances to Dylan Thomas' Poetry*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963), p. 158, n. 8.
- 17 See Martin Dodsworth, "The Concept of Mind and the Poetry of Dylan Thomas", in Walford Davies, ed., *Dylan Thomas: New Critical Essays* (London: Dent, 1972), p. 115, and Terrence M. Pratt, "Adventures in the Poetry Trade", pp. 68-72. Hélène Bokanowski also follows this line of enquiry (see *Dylan Thomas* (Paris: Seghers, 1975), pp. 139-42).
- 18 FitzGibbon, *The Life of Dylan Thomas* (London: Dent, 1965), pp. 61, 147, 226.
- 19 See *ibid.*, p. 153 and E. W. Tedlock, ed., *Dylan Thomas: the legend and the poet* (London: Mercury, 1963), p. 74.
- 20 FitzGibbon, *The Life of Dylan Thomas*, p. 59.
- 21 Daniel Jones, *My Friend Dylan Thomas* (London and Toronto: Dent, 1977), p. 31.
- 22 Gwen Watkins writes that he had completed the first seven sonnets of "Altarwise by owl-light" (see *Portrait of a Friend* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1983), p. 25).
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

- 24 William York Tindall, *A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas* (1962; New York: Octagon, 1981), p. 287.
- 25 See Donald Williams Bruce's article, "Marooned in a Cemetery: Paul Valéry and Dylan Thomas" in *Journal of European Studies* XVIII (1988), pp. 1-8.
- 26 See Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: the Man and the Masks* (London: Faber & Faber), 1961: "The Symbolist Movement in Literature (1899), a book which was not profound but made the term 'symbolist' fashionable in England" (pp. 143-4).
- 27 T. S. Eliot, "Baudelaire and the Symbolists" in *Criterion* IX (1930), pp. 357.
- 28 *Coll. Lett.*, p. 86.
- 29 *Ibid.* p. 33. The reference is to Eliot, *The Sacred Wood*, 7th ed., (London: Methuen, 1920), p. 2.
- 30 Symons, *Symbolist Movement in Literature*, pp. 86-7.
- 31 Thomas, *Early Prose Writings*, p. 155.
- 32 See Paul Ferris, *Dylan Thomas* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), pp. 29-30. Similarly, Thomas spoke in 1952 of "words, words, words . . . each of which seemed alive forever in its own delight and glory and right" ("I Am Going to Read Aloud", p. 14).
- 33 Symons, *Symbolist Movement in Literature*, pp. 68-9.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 69, n. 1.
- 35 See Ralph Maud, "Dylan Thomas' *Collected Poems*: Chronology of Composition" in *Publications of the Modern Language Association* LXXVI (1961), p. 294.
- 36 Walford Davies, *Dylan Thomas* (Milton Keynes: Open U. P., 1986), p. 109.
- 37 See Maud, "Dylan Thomas' *Collected Poems*: Chronology of Composition", p. 293.
- 38 Symons, *Symbolist Movement in Literature*, p. 89.
- 39 Charles Baudelaire, "Correspondances", ll. 5-11: Like long echoes that in the distance become intertwined / Into a dark and deep unity, / Limitless as night and as the light, / Fragrances, colours and sounds answer to each other. / There are perfumes fresh as the flesh of children / Soft as oboes, green as meadows, / - And others, corrupt, rich and triumphant . . . (My translation).
- 40 See Maud, "Dylan Thomas' *Collected Poems*: Chronology of Composition", p. 293.
- 41 Charles Baudelaire, "Réflexions sur quelques-uns de mes contemporains" in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1968), p. 471: Indeed, Swedenborg . . . had already taught us . . . that everything, form, movement, numbers, colours, perfumes, in the *spiritual* as in the *natural*, has signification, reciprocity, is converse, *correspondent*. If we broaden the demonstration . . . we arrive at this truth that everything is hieroglyphic, and we know that symbols are only obscure in a relative way, that is to say, according to the native purity, goodwill or sensitiveness of souls. And what is a poet (I take the word in its widest sense) if not a translator, a decipherer? (My translation).
- 42 *Coll. Lett.*, p. 25.
- 43 *Ibid.*, pp. 43-4.
- 44 Ann Elisabeth Mayer describes how the idea of the artist as endowed with "unusual vision" and whose role it is to translate the "written world" is also largely at play in Thomas's early stories (see Ann Elisabeth Mayer, *Artists in Dylan Thomas's Prose Works: Adam Naming and Aesop Fabling* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), p. 85). Her first chapter is entirely devoted to the notion of a "written world" in Thomas's prose.
- 45 *Coll. Lett.*, p. 82.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- 47 John Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas: his life and work*, 3rd ed. (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1996), p. xvi.
- 48 Ellmann, *Yeats*, p. 67.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 71.
- 50 W.Y. Tindall, "The Symbolism of W.B. Yeats" in John Unterecker, ed., *Yeats: a collection of critical essays* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1982), pp. 43-53.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- 52 Jacob Korg also noted this analogy in *Dylan Thomas* (New York: Twayne, 1965), p. 60.
- 53 For a précis of Thomas's debt to Blake, see Damian Walford Davies, "'In the Path of Blake': Dylan Thomas's 'Altarwise by Owl-Light', Sonnet I" in *Romanticism* III. 1. (1997), pp. 91-2.
- 54 J. G. Davies, *The Theology of William Blake* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1948), p. 40, n. 2.
- 55 *Coll. Lett.*, p. 98.
- 56 John Donne, *Sermons* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1920), p. 67.
- 57 W.Y. Tindall, *A Reader's Guide to Dylan Thomas*, p. 96.
- 58 Walford Davies, *Dylan Thomas: the poet in his chains* (W. D. Thomas Memorial Lecture, Swansea, 1986), p. 20.
- 59 Davies, *Dylan Thomas*, p. 109.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p. 108.
- 61 *Coll. Lett.*, p. 97.