Fern Hill

by

Dylan Thomas

Of all twentieth century poems this is the one I most love and it is perhaps the best ever written about childhood. Using poetic techniques which many modern poets have abandoned, Thomas perfectly captures the essence of those years below the age of seven when life is new and full of movement and joy and magic. The poem is quite long, and not easy at first sight, so I am adding a critique below as well as an audio reading. The poem has to be read aloud to be fully appreciated.

In Fern Hill Dylan Thomas does something which is very difficult for most people, and that is to cross the bridge of memory and re-enter the time before the age of reason. To achieve this he turns clichés and conventional expressions upside down, and juxtaposes images which the adult mind would not put together. I will give a detailed analysis of the first verse, and pick out particular features of the rest.

It is apple harvest time on a farm in Wales and the child Dylan Thomas is bursting with happiness so that it feels as if the whole house is singing and dancing with him. The cliché is: happy as the day is long, but instead Thomas tells us he was happy as the grass was green - thus connecting two ideas together in a new way. This gives a sense of immediacy. A dingle is a small wooded hollow. Everything is connected and alive to a small child. The image of Time appears throughout the poem: in the first verse Father Time - we know him as the old man with the sickle and the white hair - who lets the child climb on his knee and look into his eyes. Looking into Father Time’s eyes is very strange. When I read this I see the eyes contain long corridors with crystal doors leading off, because what the child sees are the heydays or high points of the future. None of these future heydays compares with the child’s heyday, which is “golden”. Thomas’ metaphors often have resonances with other worlds.

“Honoured among wagons” shows the young boy riding on a wagon through the countryside which is full of apple orchards laden with fruit, and feeling like a prince. Whereas “once upon a time” is the traditional opening of a fairy story, “once below a time” adds to this phrase the idea of timelessness, because time has not yet become important. Everything - trees, leaves,
flowers, grass, apples, barley - is jumbled together in a glorious abundance that trails “down the rivers of the windfall light.” This line is superb; it has so many overtones. We see the summer light falling like rivers through trees, creating a shimmering, dappled effect, because the windfall refers not only to apples on the ground but to the freedom of light and branches blowing in the wind to move as they will.

The concepts of time and spirituality keep recurring throughout the poem. In verse 2 time appears again, mercifully allowing him to be ‘golden’ as he has the freedom to roam the countryside and experience the deep spirituality in nature as “the Sabbath rang slowly in the pebbles of the holy streams.” Note the rhythm here as the pebbles in the streams call to him like church bells calling people to prayer. All creation is sacred.

“Hay fields high as the house” are as a child would see them, and “tunes from the chimneys” is pure magic as again two different images are juxtaposed: why shouldn’t smoke sing? It reminds me of my favourite scene in Mary Poppins where the characters walk out of the chimney and up a smoke staircase before the chimney sweeps dance among the chimney pots.

“As I rode to sleep” - how easily sleep comes! - and at night the liveliness and movement doesn’t stop as the farm, owls and horses all flash away. “Blessed among stables” echoes Mary “blessed among women” and morning when it returns is holy, like the first morning of creation, and praise is praise of God.

His “sky-blue trades” are all his happy pursuits free and wide as the sky, but Time is waiting and allows “so few and such morning songs before the children, green and golden, follow him out of grace.” Morning carries the resonance of mourning as the children have to leave the Garden of Eden and enter a state where there is no longer the grace of God.

Time takes him “up to the swallow-thronged loft by the shadow of my hand.” Swallows build their nests in high places, like the lofts of farm buildings, and gather in huge numbers as they prepare for their long journey. The child also has to leave, and Time takes him away, holding him by the shadow of his hand because he is not consciously aware of what is happening. He awakes one morning and the farm he knew in all its magic has gone, leaving only the ordinariness of adult perception. The rest of life is by comparison a slow death, an imprisonment, even though he is still young. All he can do is protest.

Dylan Thomas was the most celebrated poet of the early 1950s and by rights money and fame and his marriage should have brought him happiness. But in spite of all his success he became a heavy drinker and died age 39 from alcohol-assisted pneumonia. It is sad that he did not find a spiritual path,
since we now know that it is possible to rediscover something of the vision of childhood. In those days spiritual options were few and conventional religion would not have suited him. There was a film made about him a couple of years ago which I have not seen.

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Fern Hill

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.

And as I was green and carefree, famous among the barns
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home,
In the sun that is young once only,
Time let me play and be
Golden in the mercy of his means,
And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman, the calves
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked clear and cold,
And the sabbath rang slowly
In the pebbles of the holy streams.

All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay
Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air
And playing, lovely and watery
And fire green as grass.
And nightly under the simple stars
As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,
All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars
Flying with the ricks, and the horses
Flashing into the dark.

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white
With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all
Shining, it was Adam and maiden,
The sky gathered again
And the sun grew round that very day.
So it must have been after the birth of the simple light
In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses walking warm
Out of the whinnying green stable
On to the fields of praise.

And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the gay house
Under the new made clouds and happy as the heart was long,
In the sun born over and over,
I ran my heedless ways,
My wishes raced through the house high hay
And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that time allows
In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning songs
Before the children green and golden
Follow him out of grace,

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,
Nor 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.

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