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## A Ramble on Fern Hill

Jonathan Tuck  
Tutor  
St. John's College, Annapolis

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I want to do several things at once: To give a partial reading of "Fern Hill," by Dylan Thomas, and to catch myself in the act of giving such a reading in order to reflect on what it means to give a reading. When I say "give a reading," I do not mean only that I want to read the poem aloud-- although I do want to do that too-- but to give an analysis, an interpretation, an exegesis. It's interesting that the lit. crit. locution "to give a reading" should mean this: almost as if to read the poem is to analyze it, or to analyze it is only to read it. But I think there's a particular appropriateness to this locution when applied to a lyric poem: Whatever "lyric" means--and in our day it seems to mean nothing more than a pretty short poem-- its etymology suggests that we should be thinking of an utterance which is to be sung, and even accompanied by music. If the poem comes first to our ear, not our eye, it remains there in some way even through every act of cutting it up and surrounding it with commentary. The concrete presence of the sung or spoken poem unifies and holds together all the discursive particularities in an interpretation. When we interpret at length, we distance ourselves from this presence, but only temporarily: for in my experience there is no such thing as ruining a poem by analysing it. We cannot "murder to dissect"; the poem is resurrected each time we read it again. But if our act of interpreting has been fruitful, it is not the same poem now;

this new presence holds together more particulars, more complexities, more internal articulations. So the purpose of interpreting the poem is to be able to read it again, and also to come to know part of it for the first time. It is in this sense that I intend to "give a reading" of "Fern Hill," and to watch myself closely in order to see how I do it.

In teaching lyric poems, I have found that certain students are aware of having a certain kind of "blind spot" (actually, it would be better to say a "deaf spot") when it comes to the appreciation of poetry. They are genuinely puzzled by what others find to interest themselves in while reading a great lyric poem; and they are alarmed at having to try to write anything substantive about it. I cannot aspire to opening blind eyes or deaf ears; but I hope to try to give some practical counsel to such people about possible ways to open up what has been a closed-off area for them. They may not be able to find the same immediate appeal in poems that other readers do, but I would like them to see how a poem can be discussible.

Why do I choose "Fern Hill" as the specimen for this how-to-do-it demonstration? Certainly not because it is an "easy" poem; in fact, an easy poem, whatever that is, would be exactly the wrong kind for a demonstration. My motive for choosing "Fern Hill" is alarmingly simple: I believe that it is the greatest lyric poem in the English language-- at least among those I am aware of-- and I have a kind of evangelistic zeal to share it with others and to display it as the greatest. But what on earth can I mean by the preposterous claim that "Fern Hill" is the greatest English lyric poem? It seems clear that I have yet another task: To think about what makes a poem good, or great. It is not

that I want you to agree with me in my evaluation of "Fern Hill"; but perhaps what makes this poem great for me is what may make some other lyric poem great for you.

In the process, I want to show that "Fern Hill"'s relation to the theme of time is not accidental but is part of what makes the poem so good; that all poetry, or at least certainly all lyric poetry, is concerned with time because time is one of the conditions within which it comes to light. And this presupposes that poems are characteristically about poetry, whatever else they are also about. This reflexive property of poems gives a clue to what kinds of things to look for in analysis, in "giving a reading": instances where the theme of the poem is somehow mirrored in the poem's form, so that in the course of being about something else, the poem can also be about itself. This is a way of poems' being about poetry that is I think more substantive than the less interesting sense in which each poem necessarily redefines the possibilities of the form, genre or tradition within which it is working.

In the course of "giving a reading," I am reviving into the present an entity which has two kinds of temporal extension: (1) First: At every "performance" of the poem, every reading-through of it, whether silent or aloud, I am reminding myself of the poem's emergence through time-- not only in the way that every spoken language does (since only one sound can be spoken at a time) but also in the special way that poems, by their rhythm and measurement of time units, formalize and almost spatialize -- through repetition-- that raw temporality of language. (2) Second: The other form of temporal

extension is the endurance through several different renditions or performances of the "same" poem-- the several often spread out over years, decades or centuries. It is in this way that a poem can be a monument more enduring than brass or stone, as Horace and many others claim. Clearly, it is problematic how these several performances "belong" to the "same" poem-- in somewhat the same way that the relation of a given production or performance to the Shakespearean text, or of a playing of a symphony to its notated form on paper, are also problematic. One might ask what sort of existence the "poem" has when it is not being "performed." Is it only potential? And why, strangely, does it show signs of having changed for us when it reemerges into actuality at our next reading?

But instead of addressing these issues, I think we should make actual the particular poem we are to look at. It follows from what I've said, as well as from all of my experience with poetry that the right way to approach a poem, whether by oneself or in the company of a class, is to read it aloud initially--perhaps several times; and then, after talking about it or thinking about it, to read it aloud again, to "put it back together again." (This seems comparable to the actions of analysis & synthesis in mathematical proof.) Here, then, is my first practical counsel to those who find poetry hard to enjoy: The lyric poem, in particular, does not exist until it is read aloud, preferably several times. It is better still if you can memorize it and recite it aloud from memory--though this may come only after many oral readings. Now, in approaching "Fern Hill," there's a special condition which does not exist in approaching a poem by Donne or Keats or Shakespeare-- namely that we have a recording of Thomas himself reading his poem.

Should I read it myself, or play his version? And if both, when shall I do which?

It seems dramatically right to start with Thomas's reading, which, like the printed version on the page, is part of the "received" form of the poem as it comes to us. But then if time permitted, I should really read it aloud myself, as each of you should: Only in this way would the poem begin to become ours, to sound on our inner ear as we proceed to think about it. Then after analyzing it and in some way making it more fully "mine," I should read it aloud myself at the end. The hope is that the second reading aloud will contain or embody much of what is gained or learned in the intervening analysis-- contain or embody both for me the reader and for those co-readers to whom I am reading. Choosing this order reflects a literary-theoretical allegiance of my own, in favor of appropriating the artwork, making it new and making it mine, rather than trying as an archaeologist to arrive at the author's intention. So that is what I will plan to do, and here is Dylan Thomas's reading of "Fern Hill":

### 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 10  
 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 15  
 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 20  
     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 25  
     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, 30  
         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 35  
         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, 40  
         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, 45

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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Dylan Thomas  
 (1914-1953)

Though it's not always best for an analysis to start at the first line, or the first word, and proceed diachronically through the text, in this case I will do so, almost in despair: There is so much richness, so many logical starting places that lead straight into the heart of the poem. The poem's first two words are "Now as." Each is ambiguous, and there is some connection in their ambiguities. "Now" may be sheerly a temporal indicator, in which case we must think of the poem as referring to the present time in which it is spoken by its speaker. There's a difficulty here, though, since the first line goes on to refer to the past: "Now as I was young and easy." But we might still think that the purpose of the initial "Now" is somehow to recreate or reenact the past, real or imagined, that is portrayed in most of the poem. The innocence of that past is perhaps regainable in some vicarious way; and it is true that one of the effects of the poem seems to be to make us feel the experience of Thomas's innocent childhood visits to his aunt's farm at Fernhill. But the other possible meaning of "now" is almost exactly opposite to this one: It may be a transitional particle, used to introduce an antithetical idea, as in the following imaginary statement: "As an adult I know and feel my mortality and my fallen state.

Now when I was a boy, I never did; I thought I would live forever." The "Now" in the poem's first line gives the utterance that is the poem a very concrete conversational context: Breaking away from the thought of how he thinks and feels at present, the speaker turns his attention to his childhood, as specifically opposed to the present. In this reading of "Now", the poem is a statement of the finality of loss, rather than an evocation of paradise regained. Of course the poem as a whole is both. My point is that the one word "now" holds together these two possibilities, containing in a small compass many of the largest themes and issues in the whole poem.

We find a similar phenomenon when we look at the poem's second word, "as." What among many possibilities does "as" mean here? Even as I ask the question, I am unable to forget that the word "as" recurs in the poem, especially in constructions implying comparison or similitude: "happy as the grass was green"; "singing as the farm was home"; "the hay fields high as the house"; "fire green as grass"; "happy as the heart was long." If similes and metaphors are the essence of poetry, transforming our vision by pointing out correspondences between the world we know and some imagined, invisible one, then our consideration of the power of "as" becomes a kind of referendum on the power of poetry. Can it in fact transform our vision as it claims? Does "as I was young and easy" mean "at the time when I was young and easy"? or "because I was young and easy"? or "in the same way that I was young and easy"? or "to the same degree that I was young and easy"? or "as long, and only as long, as I was young and easy"? It is clear that each of these variant readings produces a different sense of the power of time and of the power of imagination to triumph over time. "Happy as the grass

was green" sounds comfy and proverbial, like "happy as the day is long" or "happy as a clam." (Actually, neither of those similes will bear much scrutiny either, will they?) Taken in this simple-minded or innocent way, the speaker means that he was happy to the same degree that the grass was green. Comparisons like this usually make use of a vehicle of comparison that is supposed to be unproblematic: "strong as an ox" means very strong because an ox by its nature is very strong. Grass is very green, but the grass by its very nature does not stay green forever; is it in the nature of things that the speaker will not stay happy forever? Only if "happy as the grass was green" also means happy in the same way that the grass was green, naturally, unreflectively-- and temporarily. Because the greenness of the grass is implicitly localized in time, it may seem diminished: That which doesn't stay green might seem to be less green, or only apparently green. Was the speaker less happy than he thought he was, only apparently happy? In this way the vehicle of the simile-- the thing used for purposes of comparison--makes more complex our notion of the tenor of the simile, the thing being compared to something. One of our readings of the ambiguous word "as" leads us to other readings: happy at the time when the grass was green, and only at that time; happy as long as the grass was green. An additional complication enters when, in the next stanza, it is not the grass but the child that is green: "as I was green and carefree." Here "green" must be able to mean not only "young, fresh" but also "inexperienced, raw, naive"-- as in the expression "greenhorn." At this point the tenor and the vehicle of our original simile have collapsed into each other: The child and the grass come together in their greenness, and perhaps we remember the words of the First Epistle General of Peter:

For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of  
man is as the flower of grass. The grass withereth,  
and the flower thereof falleth away:

But the word of the Lord endureth for ever.

(I Peter 1:24-25)

We have been noticing ambiguities in the words "Now" and "as." I induce from this another practical precept for the poetry-blind: Seek out ambiguities and try to spell them out patiently and deliberately, almost literal-mindedly. Because the language of poetry has a kind of life of its own, the natural lexical range of a word is brought into play whenever that word is used. It is especially fruitful when the ambiguous readings even seem to contradict each other more or less directly: Seeing the meaning as problematic makes it possible to connect alternative meanings to different ways of feeling. I think I am assuming that language may not always be ambiguous, but feelings almost always are; so that complexities in the language may bring it closer to the reality of our feelings. Another precept for the uninitiated reader of poems: Look hard for repetitions of the same word, or the same image, or the same sound. In our case, we segued into the poem's second use of "as" from considering its first use. Part of the formality of a poem, part of its architecture, is the use of repetition; even the ideas of meter and rhyme presuppose this. But repetition is never pure, as Heraclitus and Kierkegaard remind us; it is always a re-evocation, containing both sameness and difference. Hence one of the activities of reading a poem is comparing and contrasting. Jumping back and forth in a poem to compare and contrast usages of the same word or image, holding them up together, is a way of treating the poem as a simultaneous structure rather than merely a flowing-in-time.

But noticing differences is a reminder that pure repetition is impossible because the poem exists in time. This kind of comparing and contrasting is the very theme of "Fern Hill": The speaker juxtaposes scenes from his past with his present altered condition, and poses the question of whether he can renew or retain his youth somehow-- perhaps through poetry itself? For this reason "Fern Hill" is extraordinarily concentrated and unified; it almost seems like pure lyricism because it both is and is about the very things that constitute the "lyric moment."

Let us take our own advice and go on looking for other usages of the word "as." When we next meet a comparable phrase, in the third stanza, "fire green as grass" makes little obvious sense; fire is not typically green. The fire seems to be there in order to continue the catalogue of the elements, begun in "air/ And playing, lovely and watery." The earth would seem to be absent from this list, except that it is present everywhere, not only in the "grass" but in the fields, the pebbles in the streams, and in the whole subject at hand: "it was all..." The lower element of earth is transformed into higher elements: the flowing water, emblematic of time's motion; air, which by a pun is also song, the "tunes from the chimneys"; and fire, highest and simplest, connected with warmth and light. We still don't see how the fire can be green; perhaps the peat or coal used in that part of Wales burns with a greenish flame? Or perhaps "green" here means "new" or "young" or "innocent," like the childhood of the narrator-- in the case of fire, "closer to the time of Creation," and therefore more elemental. (This might also help us to account for the "whinnying green stable" in line 35). Or perhaps the problematic fact that fire normally lacks greenness makes the simile into a "dissimile," of the same negative form as that famous slogan, "A woman needs a man as a fish needs a bicycle"; and if so,

perhaps this problematic form of the simile is meant to cast doubt on other uses of the word "as." Let's look at some more: The hay fields were of course not as high as the house, except to the child's innocent eye, which makes things so only by the imperatives of desire: "My wishes raced through the house high hay." Listening to the sounds at the end of that line, we realize that the comparison between the hay and the house has gone from measurement into a pure exclamation of joy. Like the child's seeing, the poem's sounding has the power simply to enact its wishes. Parallel to "happy as the grass was green," in the second stanza, is the more peculiar "singing as the farm was home." It is peculiar because we would normally think that the farm either is or isn't home; unlike the greenness of grass, the farm's identity as home does not admit of quantification, which seems to eliminate some of our possible ambiguous readings. But if we are told that the farm was not, in fact, home to Thomas-- he visited there during the summers-- the eliminated variant reading comes back in a more sinister form: The boy was singing in the same way, or to the same degree, that the farm was home-- that is, only temporarily or not at all. Singing has already been attributed to the house: "the lilting house," "tunes from the chimneys." It will come again in the poem's last image, another simile: "I sang in my chains like the sea." These are "morning songs," with all the poignancy of the pun hammered home by the word "such." They are "morning songs" spelled without the "u" because they belong to youth, both the boy's youth and the youth of the world. They are "mourning songs," spelled with the "u" and with the qualifications of "such" and "so few," because even our youthful singing is an unknowing presage of our own funeral music. It is clearly not an accident that the topic of song, like the transforming power of similes, is the

poem's reflexive comment on poetry itself.

It is not only phrases with "as" that are repeated frequently throughout the poem; one of its most prominent features is the repetition, with crucial variations, of words, images, and even whole syntactic structures. (The first two stanzas, especially, display a high degree of this syntactic parallelism.) But moving to smaller units of meaning, it is very noticeable that there is much repetition of sounds. Thomas is known as a poet for whom flashy sound effects almost take on a life of their own-- as if abstract patterns of vowel and consonant repetition could make some kind of musical pleasure for us, regardless of the meanings of the words. But in this poem at least, I think I can show that the repetitions are purposive, and that they are directly related to his theme. Look for example at the poem's beginning: "Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs." The stressed syllables "I", "eas-", "un-" and "ap-" all alliterate, since any word beginning with a vowel alliterates with any other. "Boughs" alliterates with the "b" in "about" and assonates both with "about" and with "house." "House" alliterates with "happy," whose first syllable assonates with "grass," which alliterates with "green." The alternating links of alliteration and assonance form a chaining effect. We see it again at the end of the stanza in

And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves  
Trail with daisies and barley  
 Down the rivers of the windfall light.

The purpose of this chaining of sounds, this singing in chains, is to imitate the "trailing" stream of the daisies and barley, to connect the various parts of this paradise of sense-stimuli into a single manifold of sound, or light, or time. The boy's world has a coherence that came from

innocence, or from his infantile perception of himself as not separated from the objects of his seeing and hearing. The unity of this world is later reflected in the third and fourth stanzas, in the poem's use of the word "it" without any obvious antecedent. And within this world, the boy also has a child's fantasies of omnipotence: It was he who had the trees and leaves trail. This omnipotence corresponds both to the power Adam and Eve are said to have had over nature while still in a state of innocence, and also to the power that the poet still has over his little created world, even in a fallen state. Through playing with patterns of vowels and consonants, Thomas too "has" the trees and leaves trail. Does this mean that poetry can restore innocence and conquer Time? But as the last line says, the poet sings in another set of chains, not of his own making.

It seems clear that sound-effects can be imitative in an almost iconic way. They can act less directly as well. Notice a pattern of internal rhyme in the first stanza:

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs  
 About the lilting house...

And again:

Time let me hail and climb.

In each case these internal rhymes act to frame and enclose either a line or a phrase, giving a sense of secure self-containedness and self-sufficiency. "Time let me hail and climb" is parallel with the second stanza's "Time let me play and be." The self-enclosed character of the first of these lines leads us to expect the second to be self-enclosed too-- and it seems to make sense that

way: Time let me play and time let me be-- either let me exist or left me alone. The word "Golden" thus comes as a shock; we had not expected that the line would be enjambed, even though "Golden" in the second stanza is parallel with the same word at the same position in the first stanza. But as it turns out, the two are not syntactically parallel: The first "Golden" is part of a parenthetical adjectival phrase, modifying "me"; the second "Golden" is a predicate adjective with "be." This difference throws into relief a difference in meaning: The "Golden" of the first stanza seems to be unambiguously favorable, while the second "Golden" carries a hint of another possibility: The speaker is not already golden, a fair-haired lad smiled on by Fortune and befriended by Time. Rather we see Time letting him be golden. From here it is not a long jump to another possible meaning of "golden," which certainly comes into play in the following line: "And green and golden I was huntsman and herdsman." Here "golden" suggests the important difference between spring and harvest time; the latter is still a prosperous, auspicious time, but it is a time of ripeness and intimations of autumn and encroaching death. We see this in the way the phrase "green and golden" develops in the fifth stanza:

Before the children green and golden  
Follow him out of grace.

The pairing of "green and golden" becomes, in the last stanza, explicitly, "green and dying." Even in the first moments of childhood, we have started on our journey toward death; as the Clown says in As You Like It,

...from hour to hour we ripe and ripe  
And then from hour to hour we rot and rot  
And thereby hangs a tale.

## (AYLI, II.vii.25-27)

As "golden" becomes "dying," as a state of ripeness or of being specially favored-- a "golden boy"-- turns into its opposite, we remember that "green" also means naive or unknowing. Hence "green and dying" comes to mean not just "growing and rotting" but "unaware of mortality, and yet mortal." What defines the boy's innocence is not so much a lack of sin as a lack of knowledge, the knowledge of his own mortality. That knowledge itself is a kind of dying, as it was for Adam and Eve in the garden.

Now the interplay of the images of color-- green, golden, white with the dew, sky blue, lamb white-- is a very conspicuous feature of the poem, one that few readers are likely to miss. But my specific claim is that the use of the internal rhymes, by setting us up for the prominence of "Golden" in the second stanza, triggers our awareness of this pattern. And if so, we can educe two more precepts for the novice analyst of poetry: (1) Listen hard to the sound effects, and when in doubt, assume they are significant. (2) Look at the ends of lines, to see places where the lineation is a way of manipulating our successive responses. We have seen two instances of unexpected enjambment, in lines 7-8 and in lines 13-14. These are the most conspicuous, but there are others.

But how do we listen to the sounds of poems, and what sort of significance do we listen for? Apart from phonemic repetitions like alliteration, assonance, consonance and rhyme-- each of which may make a pattern, whether imitative or abstract, there is the clearly imitative

phenomenon of onomatopoeia, the "making" (poieia) through a word (onoma) of something we otherwise encounter in the world. We don't see much in this poem of sheerly imitative sound, like Tennyson's "murmur of innumerable bees." Perhaps the chaining effect I described in the first stanza can be considered an example. But there is a chronic difficulty in the attempt to read sound as directly mimetic or imitative. Take the sound pattern of line 12, "In the sun that is young once only." Do the repetition of the "uh" sound and the orthographic and etymological redundancy of "once only" imitate the persistence through time of a sun that is the same each day-- truly young once only-- or do these sound effects imitate the periodicity of a series of several suns, as in line 39's "the sun born over and over"? Or does the sound by its ambiguity raise for us the same question that the poem raises: How to reconcile continuity with change and repetition, the enduring infinitude of our desire with the finitude of our lives, with the passage of time?

Sound repetitions can be local, within a line or a few lines, or they can be the architectonic by which the form of the poem is defined. Thomas used the unobvious measurement of syllabic count to define the pattern of his stanzas. He was steered to this choice by the precedent of the medieval Welsh technique known as cynghanedd ("king' ha neth"), which I will not even attempt to spell for you; in other words, by a precedent from a language other than English, unearthed by Thomas in a fit of Celtic historical nostalgia. In "Fern Hill," the six stanzas are of nine lines each. In the general form of the stanza, the first, second, sixth and seventh lines are of fourteen syllables each, the third and fifth lines are of nine syllables, and the fourth line is of six. (I'm guided here by Thomas's own pronunciation, which renders "fire" in line 22 as a

disyllable, and "blessed" in line 25 as a single syllable.) The last two lines of the stanzas vary, but in a purposive way: In the first, second and last stanzas the eighth line is seven syllables, while the ninth line is nine. In the third, fourth and fifth stanzas the eighth line is nine syllables, while the ninth line is six. In effect, the flip-flopping of the long and short lines defines two cuts in the poem, after stanza two and after stanza five. On inspection, this seems appropriate, since the result is to set off the third, fourth and fifth stanzas as a separate part. In these stanzas we are given a flashback into the particularity of the rhythm of day-night alternation as it then seemed to the young boy protagonist: In this part of the poem, the sun is "born over and over," "green and golden" can coexist, and there is no double awareness, until the end of the fifth stanza, that only by Time's mercy does all this happen. In the last stanza we get a return to the divided perspective of the first two, in which our view of the child's innocence is mediated by our own and the poet's experience of age and mortality. The cycle of "riding to sleep" and waking, described in detail in stanzas three and four, is recapitulated in stanza six from a different viewpoint: Instead of coming back "like a wanderer white/ with the dew," the farm in this stanza is "forever fled from the childless land." The slight variation in the forms of the stanzas makes the change explicit, but almost unnoticeably. An even more subtle pair of demarcations in the poem comes from the only two variances in the syllable counts I gave above. I said that the sixth and seventh lines of each stanza are regularly of fourteen syllables. But the sixth line of stanza one and the seventh line of stanza six have fifteen syllables each. There is a kind of logic to these cuts too: The first five lines, which precede the first metrical variation, can be seen as a kind of introductory or general statement, before we descend into the

specificity of the fairy-tale "once below a time." Similarly, the last three lines are signalled as a new gesture of summation by the metrical variation in line 52. In these last lines we get a repeating of several elements from the first two stanzas: "as I was young and easy" from line 1 (although the "Now" disappears); "in the mercy of his means" from line 14; "Time held me" echoing "Time let me" in lines 4 and 13; "green and dying" echoing "green and golden" from line 15. It is not only the extra syllable in line 52 that signals this last demarcation: Here alone we get a departure from the scheme of rhyme, near-rhyme and assonance that has unobtrusively shaped each stanza. All previous stanzas had the general pattern ABCDDABCD. Here in the last stanza, the sixth and seventh lines exchange their rhyme-sounds, pointing out a break from what has gone before. ("Dying," which corresponds with "rising," comes after "means," which corresponds with "sleep.") As if in compensation, the vowel sound symbolized by "D"--"sleep," "fields," "sea"--is the same in this stanza as that symbolized by "A"--"me" and "means"--so that the first and sixth lines assonate not only with each other, but with lines 4, 5, and 9.

Who on earth would notice these features, except me, the critic busily counting away? Do you hear them as they go past you? I doubt that even the syllabic regularity of the stanzas comes out to the casual listener, let alone the variations therefrom. But are we sure that we are not affected by what we do not consciously notice? And when we do notice it, doesn't it make the poem better for us? In a poem of almost limitless coherence, I think the assumption has to be that nothing happens by accident. If we notice a feature of the poem that seems to cohere with the others we have noticed, the burden of proof is on the person who seeks to exclude this insight, to deny that it is part of the poem's meaning. I am arguing that we adopt

the interpretive maxim of St. Augustine that in cases of doubt, we take the reading that conduces to the reign of charity. Practically speaking, this means that we incline towards the inclusion of whatever complexities we find, unless they make the poem worse, less coherent, less concentrated. In the present case, there is a fittingness about the subtlety with which the poem's formal variations work on us. We are not accustomed to syllabic verse in English; our prosody is almost universally accentual-syllabic. Syllabic verse, in our experience, tends to be in languages like French, where there is a certain uniformity of stress. Our first impression in listening to Thomas is of strongly marked accents or stresses, which tempts us to try to measure his verse as purely accentual. But if we start counting stresses, we end up with a stanza pattern more illusory than real; there are too many variations for us to be able to say with confidence what the paradigm is. Thomas's poem sings in its syllabic chains, but those chains are so light that they are almost unfelt. As listeners we are as innocent as the boy depicted in the poem; time-- or more precisely, the measurement of time in syllabic units-- lets us play and be.

The moral of the story seems to be, "Never read any poem for the first time." In fact, the experience of a poem's sound grows more specific, more itself, the longer we have listened to it, memorized it, learned the relation of part to part and of cadence to cadence. My thirty years of friendship with "Fern Hill" constitute yet another temporal perspective in my reading of the poem. The poem concerns itself with several different expanses of time: the finite life-span of the speaker, the cyclical and repetitive time-scheme of nature, the sacred historical time of creation, pastoral innocence, and fallenness. The first of these is replicated in my life-span as a reader, and the second in my repeated experience of the poem. The poem as an utterance

takes time to say or to hear; its own elapsed time somehow becomes identified with all of time--making the poem a capacious summation but also isolating it. If all of time is within it, there is nothing beyond it. In this way the poem reminds me of my essential solitude as a time-conscious being. At any moment I look forward and back and contain an infinity within me; but metaphysically I-- we-- live as we die, alone. This reflection might apply equally to all lyric poems, as a description of the "lyric moment"; it is especially true of "Fern Hill" because there are no other humans within the poem apart from the speaker of it.

The child's solitude in the poem is qualified only by the presence of personified animals and other natural beings-- like the "apple towns"-- and by the personified presence of Time. But of this latter presence, the child is unaware. His solitary consciousness is absolute and self-determining; his sense of himself is as an unmoving, stable point around which the delightful variety of the world moves. Thus as he falls asleep, the diminishing sound of the owls' hooting signals their having moved away from him, taking the farm with them. When the child awakes, it is not that he returns to the farm, but that it returns to him:

like a wanderer white  
With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder.

It is a characteristic of very young children, we are told, that they do not perceive objects as permanent, perhaps because they do not feel themselves as distinct from, standing over against, the objects in their environment. But this slightly older child does in one way realize that the motion is his, not the farm's: He sees himself as riding to sleep. As his account of the farm's motion makes clear, however, the implication of this phrase is not known to him: the

implication that sleep is a second death, that in moving through our lives, in aging we are all "riding to sleep," as we hear in the last stanza. Yet in the last stanza the question remains: Did he leave the farm or did the farm leave him-- or both? The persistence of the question is signalled by the ambiguity of the phrase, "And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land." "Fled" seems to modify "farm," but it is hard in any literal way to imagine the farm fleeing from the land. It seems possible for "fled" also to modify the subject, the speaker "I." The ambiguity is reiterated by the difficulty of "fled from the childless land." One would think that the land is only "childless" because the speaker has fled from it, or because the farm, in some idealized sense, has fled from it. Yet it is already the childless land from which the fleeing takes place. There is a suggestion here that the speaker may have physically tried to return, found the place sterile and unhomelike, and fled from it in some more literal way. But if the farm has fled, then he himself is the childless land. In either case, the doubt about who is in motion suggests that the naive perspective of the child is not entirely lost even in the imprisoned present time of the speaker's singing in his chains.

This relativity of motion in space-- this uncertainty as to whether he or the farm is moving-- is connected with a relativity of motion in time. The child feels time as the streaming past him of a river of light-- He does not yet know that the light is a windfall, that his life is a fragile gift bestowed by the grace of another. Time is measured only by the motion of the heavenly bodies: "all the sun long," "all the moon long." He himself is not aware of moving in time, of growing older. And yet the world itself is unmoved: It is perfectly new and unaltered, as at the moment of Creation:

it was all  
 Shining, it was Adam and maiden,  
 The sky gathered again  
 And the sun grew round that very day.

"That very day" is emphatic: it is the same day, the true day, etymologically, of Creation itself.

But the next words confuse the situation.

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.

Our first reading is likely to take "so" as inferential" Therefore, it must have been just after the birth of the simple light, on the first day of Creation. But this makes little sense-- as if we were discovering now, through a process of reasoning, that the time of his youth was literally the youth of the world. We cannot be discovering it now, since this was how it seemed to him then. So we see that we were pronouncing the word wrong, that "so" is to be stressed: It means not "therefore" but "like this." "So it must have been after the birth of the simple light"; the feeling at the remote time of creation must have been similar to the child's felt sense of newness in the rebirth of the morning. But this is a very different assertion. To be like something is not to be it, its very self: As Wallace Stevens said, "Identity is the vanishing point of resemblance." If the morning is only like the time of Creation, then the vision of the child or of the poet is not powerful enough to annihilate time. We can only speculate on what creation "must have been" like; that newness and innocence is removed from us. The vagueness

of the phrase, "after the birth of the simple light" can now be seen as purposive: We are not told how long after.

Creation itself is implicitly linked with the activity of song. The horses are "spellbound," held by magic spells, charms or enchantments. But as the etymologies suggest, "charm" and "enchantment" are words for singing. If the spell or charm is the creating word of God on the sixth day, when the animals were made, then the "fields of praise" would refer to God's looking on his work and finding it good. Like a poet, like Amphion with the walls of Thebes, God sings the world into being; we might think of the picture of creation in C.S. Lewis's Narnia tales. In Thomas's poem Creation is linked to music again in the phrase "And the Sabbath rang slowly/In the pebbles of the holy streams." But if we're tempted to think that all Nature is holy because it comes good from the hands of the Creator, we need to recall that the omnipotent being who holds us "in the mercy of his means" is not God here, but Time. The music of time's "tuneful turning" includes morning songs (without the "u"), songs of newness, innocence and Creation; but also mourning songs (with the "u"), songs of aging, experience, evening and death.

I have not begun to exhaust the resources of the poem in this very partial reading of it. But the Time which has been letting me play in the fertile fields of "Fern Hill" now hurries me toward a stopping place, if not a conclusion. I said that our criterion for the validity of a particular interpretive insight into any feature of the poem should be, does it make the poem better for us? But why should it be that a poem improves upon analysis? The implication is that complexity itself is a poetic virtue, perhaps the distinctive virtue of poetry that is good or great.

In the realm of feeling, verbal complexity is always truer than verbal simplicity, because of the incommensurability between our feelings and our thoughts. Not only must the additional complexities I notice make the poem seem better, they must also endure in later readings, to the point where they now seem native to the poem's core of meaning, not added ornaments found out by ingenuity and imputed to it. The complexities of meaning and form that I find must seem to be relatable to mixtures of feelings that the poem awakens in me. In this way, analyzing a poem, "giving a reading" of it, is a kind of introspective psychological exercise, trying to find things in the form or external content of the poem that correspond to feelings that I already have. And I impute a kind of causative power to these formal complexities that I find: I say that they are the reason that my feelings were mixed, though I have only discovered it now. Complexity is thus interesting to us--it speaks to us of ourselves-- and so it allows a poem of finite size and scope to go on interesting us as we read and reread it. But the complexity must not be merely given at the outset: Instead, the poem, to be a good poem, must move toward greater complexity as we continue to encounter it over and over in time. A great poem must improve with age, but unlike a wine or a quarterback, it should never peak and decline: and this very inexhaustibility of poems is an interesting and puzzling phenomenon.

My claim for the particular greatness of "Fern Hill" is thus partly an empirical one, resting on my continued experience of its ability to grow. "Fern Hill" is not the most complex poem I have ever read, nor even the most complex that Thomas wrote-- Many of his sonnets, especially, are notably obscure and even unintelligible on first reading. But I do claim that "Fern Hill" has exhibited the most increase in complexity as I continue to read it, unlike

gnomic, riddling poems that remain static once they are deciphered. But the increase in complexity is always contained and governed in a mysterious way by the finite sensuous experience of the spoken text of the poem, as if the moments of its sounding were the congealed presence to me of ever-increasing intervals of Time itself. The musicality of the poem's surface does not disappear or cloy as I go on reading; instead it animates, accomodates, and brings into the foreground a steadily increasing number of complexities and internal articulations. The poem deepens although its surface does not change; and the character of its depths is consistent with that of the surface. Thus it is that we can often recognize the greatness of a great poem even on first reading, long before we have unpacked it and made it our own. The spoken text is like the finite sum of an infinite series.

The specific greatness of "Fern Hill" is not however an accidental fact in my autobiography. This poem addresses itself precisely to the encounter between innocence and experience that constitutes the successive experiencing of poems and this poem. Each time we read it, the poem's theme readdresses the question of how we can connect this reading to our previous ones. The poem's identity as it subsists in the face of change and age is like my own, making me identify not only with the time-bound speaker but with the time-bound poem itself. And then I am brought to reconsider questions like, Who am I now? Can I ever prescind from my location in space and time, to consider where I end and my world begins? Can I distinguish among successive me's in time, so as to think meaningfully about what I think, feel and see now, as opposed to what I remember thinking, feeling and seeing? How can even these questions keep their meaning for me, unreconciled as I am to the implacable fact of my own



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 20  
 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 25  
 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, 30  
 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 35  
 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, 40  
 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, 45

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 50  
 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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