VERNON WATKINS AND KIERKEGAARD: "THE POETRY OF ETERNITY"

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by

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A thesis submitted in partial
fulfillment of the requirments for
the degree of MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English
Memorial University of Newfoundland
August 1988

St. John's Newfoundland

ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines Vernon Watkins's affinity for Søren Kierkegaard and the light it sheds on Watkins's poetic theory and practice. The Introduction documents Watkins's intensive knowledge of Kierkegaard's works in support of the argument that his thought is either straightforwardly Kierkegaardian, or involves an application to poetry of Kierkegaard's metaphors for Christianity. To establish the basis of Watkins's "belief" in an eternity to which both poetry and Christianity belong, the first chapter explores Watkins's theory that every "serious poet" experiences "a pivotal crisis in time" similar to the one which led to his recovery from the severe mental breakdown he suffered at age twenty-one and equivalent, it becomes clear from his prose, to the Kierkegaardian Christian "conversion," the significance of which is described in Kierkegaard's metaphor of the "Archimedean point."

The bulk of the thesis is extended analysis of a selection of Watkins's poems emphasizing the Watkins/Kierkegaard affinity, with references to Kierkegaard's works as these elucidate Watkins's concerns. The thrust of the discussion,

then, is thematic, and comments on Watkins's technique are limited. Chapters two and three consist of detailed analysis of the Kierkegaardian notion of "eternal moments" and the metaphors describing them in a selection that includes two "core" poems in the Watkins canon. Chapter four focuses on Watkins's literal application to poetry of Kierkegaard's "Paradox" and "poetry of eternity" metaphors for Christianity. Watkins's notion that the poet is "a liberating god," identifiable with Christ as the "mediator" of a poetic Christian eternity, is documented by statements concerned with it in his prose and poetry and by analysis of his poem "Egyptian Burial: Resurrection in Wales" where the theory is seen in practice.

The Conclusion relates Watkins's Kierkegaardian metaphysic of "inwardness or subjectivity" and his exclusive concern with "the poetry of eternity" to the predominant complaint in Watkins criticism -- that Watkins does not ground his poems in the physical or everyday world -- and to his reputation as an "obscure" poet.

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NOTE ON DOCUMENTATION

In the thesis I am using the method of parenthetical documentation adopted by MLA in 1984. Internal documentation consists of brief parenthetical references in the text which are keyed to the list of works cited at the end of the thesis. Footnotes are used only for explanatory purposes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to my thesis supervisor Dr. P. Gardner for the time he has spent on constructive criticism of my work and, not least, for his patience and tact. I wish to express my thanks also to Gwen Watkins and W.T.D. Watkins for their promptness in answering my letters; to the Queen Elizabeth II Library, especially Dr. Martin Howley, Humanities Librarian, and the staff of Inter-Library Loans for assistance; to Memorial Univeristy of Newfoundland for a fellowship; and to Mrs. Cathy Murphy, English Department Secretary at Memorial, for typing the thesis.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout his career Vernon Phillips Watkins (1906-67) sought an appropriate description for his position as a poet "entirely Welsh by birth" and living in Wales, but writing in English (qtd. in Gwen Watkins and Ruth Pryor 15). In 1946, when he had published only two of his ten volumes of poems,[1] he identified himself as "a Welshman and an English poet" ("Replies to Wales Questionnaire" 17). Although he did not remain satisfied with this description, it had two advantages: it avoided the suggestion of "a mixed parentage," the danger he saw in the term Anglo-Welsh (qtd. in G. Watkins and R. Pryor 15), and it suggested his early ambition to rival his English poetic models. Perhaps it was this suggestion that led him to change the expression. Watkins did not deny this early ambition, but he was not proud of it. By the time he had published his first volume of poems in 1941, he had rejected it as superficial and trivial. Later, in the poem "Three Harps," he spoke of his victory over the ambition for glory and renown that "From emulation drew its strength" (Cypress and Acacia 16). In 1967, the year of his death, he introduced himself to an audience for a reading of his poems at Gregynog

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[1] In the ten, I am not counting the volumes which are selections of poems previously published in book form.

as "a Welsh poet writing in English"; but perhaps recognizing a new danger, he went on to explain that the "characteristically Welsh" element in his poetry was its sound rather than its themes (qtd. in G. Watkins and R. Pryor 15). The qualification is important, for without it the second description could lead one to place a misleading emphasis on Watkins's very limited use of Welsh legend and tradition in his poetry and to ignore other, more important, influences on his work.

Watkins was born in Wales at Maesteg, Glamorgan and spent most of his life on the Gower coast of Wales; but, although both his parents were Welsh speaking, they did not teach him the Welsh language, and although he had an interest in languages and learned to read and write French and German well enough to translate poetry from these into English, he did not learn Welsh. According to Gwen Watkins and Pryor, he was quite satisfied with the resources of the English language and "could read the [Welsh] language only with a dictionary" (15), and according to Roland Mathias (whose book Vernon Watkins provides the most complete information on Watkins's early life published to date), what Watkins learned of the Welsh literary heritage came "only from his father's very occasional readings of translations from Aneirin, Taliesin, and Llywarch Hen" (10). Through his own reading (using a dictionary), he appears to have added only the poetry of Dafydd ap Gwilym and to have sought to deepen his experience of the already familiar Taliesin (Gwen Watkins, "Vernon

Watkins 1906-1967" 15). Accordingly, Watkins's knowledge of the "Welsh bardic tradition" was neither as intensive nor as extensive as commentators such as Kathleen Raine and Dora Polk suggest (Raine, "Vernon Watkins and the Bardic Tradition" 20).

Mathias points out that Taliesin is the only one of the Welsh bards to enter Watkins's poetry and that Watkins's attraction to this particular figure was based on something other than a desire to follow in the Welsh bardic tradition. It was based, Mathias argues, on Taliesin's "fortuitous connection with Gower and ... his powers of endless renewal (a theme which bore directly on Vernon's overriding concern with 'the conquest of time')" (Vernon Watkins 10). Yet it might appear that in using Taliesin, Watkins was making a deliberate claim to his Welsh literary heritage. In "Written to an Instrument," broadcast November 25, 1953 on the Welsh Home Service, he explained his use of this figure as the speaker in one of his poems: "The Welsh poet Taliesin, who claimed to have lived in all ages, is to Welsh poetry the archetype of inspiration, as Orpheus was to the Greeks ..." (50). The title of the broadcast, however, indicates Watkins's main concern: his use of Taliesin was motivated by his desire to establish his own credentials as a poet, and for Watkins that meant laying claim to divine influence. The strongest indication that Welsh legend is not the primary source for understanding his poetic themes is that having

chosen Taliesin as "the archetype of inspiration," Watkins was not governed by the existing myth explaining the source of the poet's inspiration but created his own myth of Taliesin's Christian conversion so that Taliesin as speaker might voice Watkins's own vision of the world, a vision seen from "the standpoint of Christian faith" ("Commentary on 'Poet and Goldsmith'" 158). The point is noted by Pryor in the article "The Pivotal Point in Poetry: Vernon Watkins and the Taliesin Legend" (53). This standpoint is not only the predominant point of view in his poetry but also one of its central themes.

In his youth and early manhood Watkins had yet to reach that standpoint, and during that time his reading was dominated by the major English poets. These he began to absorb and imitate at a very early age. Gwen Watkins quotes from his notes:

> By the time I was ten I had collected most of the English poets ...[.] The hold which poetry had on my sensibility increased, and hardly ever relaxed its grip.
>
> I wrote poems, and they usually reflected the style of the poet I was reading at the time. In language I was not at all precocious, only responsive. It made me confuse my own emotions with those of other poets and write like them, only very much worse. (Portrait of a Friend 11)

His early reading was reinforced by an English education. From Preparatory school at Tyttenhanger Lodge he moved to Repton and on to Magdalene College, Cambridge where he

stayed for one year. The extent to which the English poets had control over his imagination during that time and up to two years after he left Cambridge is indicated in these comments from his notes:

> I was dominated by each poet in turn, and my ambition was so shallow that I usually identified the longest poem as the greatest: and at my preparatory school I counted every night the lines of the Arthurian epic I was writing. When I went to my public school I stopped writing for eighteen months, but then a lecture on Shelley by one of the masters brought back the irresistible impulse, and I wrote poems again ... fairly continuously. At the age of twenty-one, the poems and letters of Keats, and the poetry of Shelley, Milton and Blake so governed me that the everyday world scarcely existed for me except as a touchstone for protest and indignation. (qtd. in G. Watkins, "Vernon Watkins 1906-1967" 15-16)

It is unlikely that Watkins would have considered himself a Welsh poet at that time. The self-mocking reference to the "Arthurian epic" indicates that it was not the legend itself, but desire to outdo Tennyson, that controlled his imagination at the time he began it. Perhaps he thought the legend an appropriate subject for a Welshman, but it was an English poetic greatness he was attempting to attain. Significantly, he never published (if he ever completed) this "epic." It was part of the early desire for fame and wholly unrelated to the expression of any deeply felt emotion. His identity was nebulous: he was an aspiring English poet, absorbed, as

Mathias argues, by the imaginary worlds created by his poetic predecessors and the verse he wrote was almost wholly derivative (Vernon Watkins 51).

The last sentence of the excerpt from his notes quoted above refers to the climax of this period in Watkins's life and poetry (G. Watkins, "Vernon Watkins 1906-1967" 16). At the time he was working as a bank clerk in Lloyds branch at Butetown, Cardiff, the position in which he found himself when he left Cambridge two years earlier and his father refused to pay for his proposed jaunt to Italy (Mathias, Vernon Watkins 24). It was at the age of twenty-one that he suffered a severe mental breakdown and retreated for some time from "the everyday world." The description of the breakdown quoted below is from Mathias:

> He [Watkins] described to friends in later life how, one Saturday evening in that Autumn of 1927, he returned to his lodgings at the Taff Embankment in a state of high tension. He had been reading Blake again, and rushed hither and thither about his room shouting that he had conquered time and could control both his own destiny and that of others.... [H]e heard an enormous crash outside: on going to the window he saw a motor-cyclist dead on the ground and his pillion passenger staggering up the path towards him, his face covered in blood. Immediately ... he was convinced that he had willed this and himself collapsed. (Vernon Watkins 27)

Mathias records that Watkins subsequently went to Repton and

attacked the Headmaster Dr. Fisher[2] who then arranged for him to be sent to a nursing home. According to Mathias, Watkins remained out of touch with the external world for some months, absorbed by Blake's poetry which he recited almost without interruption (28).

What caused the breakdown is a matter for speculation. Evidently, from what Watkins himself has said of his indignant attitude towards "the everyday world," it involved some form of the classic conflict between imagination and reality. The point is that the imaginary poetic world to which he withdrew was not his own but one that he attempted to appropriate through emulation. His recovery from the breakdown depended on his confronting and accepting not only the real world but also his own poetic identity.

The nature of the experience which led to Watkins's recovery, and discovery of his role as a poet will be explored in the first chapter of this thesis. What is important to note here is the effect of the experience on his response to poetry in general:

> I cannot remember when my love of poetry
> was born, but I can remember when it
> changed, and changed fundamentally.
> Since that change it is true to say that
> only that poetry seems to me authentic
> in which the passing of time is dominated
> by the vision. I now feel that a poem
> is shaped by belief. In all good poetry

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[2]This is, of course, Dr. Geoffrey Fisher who became Archbishop of Canterbury 19 April 1945.

> the transience of human life becomes an illusion. (A Rehearsal Script for a Talk Called "The Poet's Voice" 20)

Watkins came through the breakdown with a new sense of what poetry is: before the experience he was controlled by an undiscriminating poetic sensibility; after it, he had criteria by which to judge "good poetry." While it would be unwise to assume a complete change in his attitude towards the poets he had earlier tried to imitate, it is important to note that after the breakdown they did not control his imagination. Watkins alludes to this freedom in these comments on the delayed effect of the experience on his poetic practice:

> It took several years for my style to catch up with this experience, so powerful were the verbal legacies left me by the poets I had admired for so long. I now saw them in a new light, but I could not translate my transfigured vision of the world into language. (qtd. in G. Watkins, "Vernon Watkins 1906-1967" 16)

Whatever the nature of the experience, it was one that led to liberation from slavish emulation by providing him with a view of life which overcame that ambition to rival or excel other poets and was the source of his new aspiration to write poetry "shaped by belief."

It was this "belief" that governed his poetic themes. Although his nationality influenced the way he expressed them ("The use of English by Welsh or Irish or Scottish

writers is bound to be different in certain ways," he told the audience at Gregynog, "because rhythm and cadence are born in the blood" [qtd. in G. Watkins and R. Pryor 15]), it had little if anything to do with the themes themselves: the central ideas in his poetry would have been the same whatever his country or language. In fact, the experience that led to Watkins's recovery of mental health and provided him with his poetic themes also gave him the sense of belonging to a much wider community of poets and artists than either the Welsh or the English. This community cut across national boundaries and through time. In "Affinities," the title poem of the last volume of his poetry published before his death, he reveals this sense of belonging to an eternal "nation" of divinely inspired poets:

> I find them in the wings of every age
> While fools and rhetoricians hold the stage.
>
> They know instinctively that speculation
> Will never solve a single true equation.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> His work is new. Why then his name encumber
> With ancient poets? He is of their number.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Must it be anarchy to love that nation
> Which counts among its assets inspiration?
> (Affinities 18)

He speaks again of his affinity with an eternal fellowship and of his sense of contemporaneity with poets of the past in "Fidelities," the title poem of the last volume of his

poems that he selected and which was published shortly after his death:

> I was concerned with those the world forgot,
> In the tale's ending saw its life begun;
>
> And I was with them still when time was not.
> (Fidelities 72)

In this nation he included the English poets, particularly the Romantics Blake and Keats who had exerted such a profound influence on his early life and work, and the Welsh poet Taliesin; but he included as well the Germans Heine and Hölderlin, Dante, Søren Kierkegaard, and some contemporaries, notably Yeats and Dylan Thomas. There were other poets and artists whose work he considered eternal, but the ones listed are the ones he lauded most often in verse.

Among this nation of individual poets and artists Watkins found his place as an exponent of subjective truth, and for that reason it would be misleading to attempt to place him within a particular literary tradition. His ties were with individual poets rather than schools or movements. In "Demands of the Muse" Watkins has the muse say, "Yet, though a school invoke me it is he / I choose" (Affinities 22). He admired those individual poets who, he claimed, were controlled in what they wrote by an inner passion, or "belief," similar to his. Insight into the nature of this belief is crucial to an understanding of Watkins's thought,

and since it is also the basis of his poetic affinities, one way to approach it is through examination of these relationships.

Not much has been written about these relationships. (Indeed, not much more has been written about Watkins's poetry.) Of the four contributors to Watkins criticism who have written full-length studies of some feature of his life or his work, two focus on the nature of these relationships. The book Portrait of a Friend by Gwen Watkins is a lively and penetrating account of Watkins's friendship for Dylan Thomas which offers, in Leslie Norris's words, "a true, surprising picture of her husband" (Foreword xii). It is significant for this reason and for the light it throws on the many poems Watkins wrote for and about Thomas after Thomas's death. Jane McCormick's unpublished dissertation "'I Sing a Placeless and a Timeless Heaven': A Study of Several Themes in the Poetry of Vernon Watkins" treats Watkins as "a Christian Mystic and romantic poet" following in the footsteps of William Blake (265), and it is the closest there is to a full-length study of a literary influence on Watkins's ideas. Roland Mathias, one of the other two contributors, touches briefly on the influence of W.B. Yeats on Watkins's imagination and poetic style. In her study Vernon Watkins and the Spring of Vision, Dora Polk makes no attempt to identify specific sources but seeks to discover the possible myths and legends behind Watkins's "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" which, she says, contributes to an understanding of recurrent

themes and symbols in his poetry as a whole. Her method is to use any source which helps her to explain the poem, whether or not it existed at the time Watkins was writing. Among the few articles on his poetry and the many reviews of specific volumes, only one item, Ruth Pryor's "'Wisdom is Hid in Crumbs': Vernon Watkins and Dante," is a contribution to the study of Watkins's literary affinities. There is, then, still much room for investigation in this area of Watkins criticism.

Not all of the writers Watkins admired will be found to have exerted a continuing influence on his thought, but there are a few who did. One of this group is Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish "poet" of Christianity (self-titled), who was one of the few prose writers Watkins ever read. Gwen Watkins writes of her husband:

> [H]is knowledge of prose literature was minimal. Indeed he believed that reading prose spoiled the ear for poetry, as playing lawn-tennis spoils the hand and eye for rackets. Perhaps he thought prose merely a kind of spoiled poetry; at all events he read nothing but the Bible (mainly the poetic books Job and Ruth, though he knew Isaiah quite well too), the prose of Yeats which he considered a kind of poetry, and Kierkegaard, whom he considered a kind of poet who happened to write prose. (Portrait 34)

The inclusion of Kierkegaard among this select group of prose writers is one indication of Watkins's admiration for him. His interest in Kierkegaard's writings began early and

continued throughout his life. According to Jane McCormick, who studied under Watkins briefly, "During the early period of his work, prior to 1937, ... he read little [prose] beyond that of Yeats, Kierkegaard and a few mystics" (Introduction, "'I Sing'" 6). Since 1937 is the first year that a complete work by Kierkegaard was published in English, Watkins must have been reading the German translations. His son Tristan Watkins says he is not aware that Watkins owned any of these but he thinks it possible that he studied them before the first complete English translations appeared (Letter). Watkins read German during his four years at Repton, winning both the Lancelot Saye Prize and the Schreiber Prize on his last Speech Day in 1924, and he had been studying German the year he spent at Cambridge (Mathias, Vernon Watkins 18; 21). Certainly, by the time he published his first volume of poems in October, 1941, he had been reading Kierkegaard regularly. He read Kierkegaard to Dylan Thomas at Laugharne in the summer of 1939 (G. Watkins, Portrait 75), by which time three of Kierkegaard's works had been published in English translations. In a letter written between May 28 and June 21, 1941 Thomas explains a delay in returning a book by Kierkegaard that he had borrowed from Watkins:

> I have told Caitlin about Kierkegaard, & he will be sent on, with thanks for him, & love, when we are bloated enough with money to be able to bluster into the p-

> office & say, "Post this, you fool, All of it. All the way." (105)

Gwen Watkins says that one of the reasons Watkins assumed Dylan Thomas was a Christian poet was that "Dylan allowed Vernon to read Kierkegaard to him while making appreciative noises, which," she quips, "were probably sincere" (Portrait 12-13).

Watkins's reading of Kierkegaard continued under very unlikely conditions during his service as an R.A.F. policeman during the Second World War when he had the habit of "taking a volume of Kierkegaard or Blake to the railway station, where he had been sent to arrest drunks coming back from leave on the last train, and reading peacefully in the waiting-room until the last drunk had ambled back into camp" (G. Watkins, Portrait 97). This habit of carrying a volume of Kierkegaard around with him led to his becoming the butt of one of Dylan Thomas's favourite jokes, used, for example, in the broadcast "A Visit to America." Gwen Watkins, who tells the story, emphasizes the serious and "innocent" nature of a remark by Watkins to Thomas following a near miss by a V2 rocket during an air raid:

> Dylan, on a visit to London from either Llangain or New Quay, was riding in a taxi down Regent Street with Vernon, when a V2 cut off its engine apparently directly overhead. (... if a V2 cut out overhead, although you had time to breathe several sighs, they would almost certainly be your last). This particular rocket, however, came to earth some

> distance away, and as the taxi drove on through the dust and smoke, Dylan said trembling, "Wasn't it funny? I was sure we were going to be killed, and all I could think of was that I hoped I'd be blown to bits, because I couldn't bear the thought of my body being found with a copy of Reveille open at the pin-ups page." "I should have been all right," Vernon answered seriously, "because I always carry Kierkegaard in my pocket." (Portrait 107)

However unintentionally humorous, this incident indicates that Watkins's interest in Kierkegaard's works remained intense.

Kierkegaard was one of the authors to whom Watkins showed an abiding and obstinate loyalty. In answer to a query from the present writer, Gwen Watkins says that he

> read and possessed all of S.K.'s works which had been published up to the sixties.... I should say with confidence that the Bible, Yeats and Kierkegaard, in that order, were by far the greatest influences on his life and his poetry.... All of these [Mrs. Watkins believes Blake and Shelley shared second place] figured constantly in his conversation, and, although he did read other poets with great interest, formed the staple of his constant reading. (Letter)

Gwen Watkins remembers his "dismay, since he thought all S.K. wrote and did was perfect," when, in discussions with him, she questioned Kierkegaard's handling of the relationship with Regine (Letter). Another of Watkins's acquaintances in a tribute to him in the Watkins Memorial Issue of the Anglo Welsh Review recalls having elicited the same reaction when he criticized Kierkegaard's writings:

> I remember arguing once that some of the views of Kierkegaard and the doctrine of everlasting damnation, possibly basic to Christianity itself, appalled me. At first he rather implied that this, to him, was rather like denying the facts of life.... (Masterman 14)

Watkins's amazement in both cases is testimony to his deep admiration for Kierkegaard whom he placed in the small group of writers he considered to be above criticism in both their private actions and their writings.

Despite this evidence of continuing interest, Watkins's affinity for Kierkegaard has not been explored by writers interested in his work. This fact is the more surprising given the debate over Watkins's claim to be "a Christian poet" (A Rehearsal Script 22). At one extreme in the debate is Jane McCormick arguing that "Watkins' Christianity is inherent in every poem" ("'I Sing'" 209). Near the other is Dora Polk questioning "Those who view Watkins as an orthodoxly Christian poet" and arguing for the centrality of pagan myth and legend in his "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" which she and Kathleen Raine consider quintessential Watkins (Polk 90; 20). Between the extremes is Roland Mathias who argues for the presence of both "pagan and Christian" elements in Watkins's poetry and concludes that "to the very end, though he was Christian in dogmatic belief and by intention a Christian poet the terms of his poetic 'conquest' [of time] were still curiously unorthodox, and in some respects, contradictory" (Vernon Watkins 3; 30).

The present examination of Watkins's affinity for Kierkegaard should serve, in part at least, to fill a gap in the arguments for Watkins as a Christian poet. In a review of Mathias's book Vernon Watkins, Ruth Pryor writes:

> The impact of Kierkegaard on Watkins's thinking has not yet been investigated, but he is likely to prove a more prolific source of metaphor than Plato. (227)

Pryor's comment is quoted and endorsed by McCormick in her doctoral dissertation (264-5), and Gwen Watkins writes:

> V.W.'s own poems show everywhere the influence of S.K.'s thought.... I don't think that nearly enough (or indeed any) attention has been paid to the influence of S.K. on V.W., and you are quite right to emphasize it. (Letter)

While the relationship has not been explored, then, it has been recognized as a possibly significant avenue into Watkins's poetry.

The first concern of this study is to explore the influence of Kierkegaard's concept of Christian "Conversion" upon Watkins's poetic theory through a brief examination of Watkins's own "conversion" and an analysis of his theory that every "serious" poet undergoes such a complete change in attitude and point of view. The focus in the first chapter is on Watkins's prose, particularly the articles on Owen and Yeats in which he outlines and illustrates the theory.

The focus of the next two chapters is extended explication of a selection of Watkins's poems with reference to Kierkegaard's works as these throw light on Watkins's themes, especially on the notion of eternal moments, a notion that originates in the discovery of the religious point of view described in the first chapter. The poems are chosen primarily to emphasize the Watkins/Kierkegaard connection and not to illustrate Watkins's technique. The discussion does include some stylistic commentary when it seems inevitable as it does in analysis of the two "leper-healed" poems, but comments on technique in this section are otherwise largely restricted to integrated analysis of the effect of Kierkegaardian images and figures and of structure, both of which are so closely tied to content that they may be perceived to be part of it. The anchor poems "Taliesin and the Spring of Vision" and "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" in chapters two and three, respectively, are chosen also because they are considered core poems in Watkins's work, poems which have impressed critics as expressions of his chief concerns.

Chapter four examines Watkins's conception of the poet's role as a "mediator" of a poetic Christian eternity, a notion that is an application to poetry of Kierkegaard's conception of Christianity as "the Paradox" and "the poetry of eternity." Bases for this discussion are Watkins's comments in prose and poetry on the role of poets for whom he felt affinity and his poem "Egyptian Burial: Resurrection

in Wales" in which he plays the role of the poet as "liberating god."

The need for this kind of close reading of Watkins's individual poems is pointed out by Mathias whose description of the situation in 1971, which he repeats in substance in the 1974 study, is still valid:

> ... the certainty of this personal definition [of Watkins as a Christian] has bemused critics and readers alike into accepting his poetry as an extended cumulus of mysticism whose individual cloudlets they need not too carefully penetrate. Alternately and more seriously, his work has been granted the trappings of high regard but has not been closely read and interpreted. ("Grief and the Circus Horse" 96)

Watkins criticism is still at the stage where it is necessary to find "keys" to his thought, to use the term Polk uses in describing her purpose in the study of "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" (19). Polk, Mathias, Gwen Watkins and McCormick have all made valuable contributions to an understanding of Watkins's poetry, but as noted above, there is more information that needs to be compiled before Watkins is no longer dismissed as an obscure poet, albeit one of great technical skill.

Given that the aim of the thesis is to elucidate the content rather than the technique of Watkins's poetry, the poems selected for inclusion may not include his best. For that reason, and to compensate for the scant attention given to technical matters in the bulk of the discussion, some

general comments on the elements of Watkins's style touched on briefly in the body form the basis of the conclusion. A short survey of the literature on Watkins is used to identify those stylistic elements that have led to either critical praise or censure. From this survey, a thread of criticism emerges that helps to explain what it is in terms of style and content that prevents reviewers and readers from giving Watkins's poetry their unqualified approval and so keeps Watkins from being considered a major figure in his own time and from exerting any lasting influence on the generation of poets who came after him.

It will be clear that the subject of the thesis is Watkins and not Kierkegaard. References to Kierkegaard's works are used either in the form of a gloss on Watkins's or to identify a possible source for a metaphor, and no attempt is made to include the whole of Kierkegaard's thought. I have included in the bibliography only those books by Kierkegaard found to shed light on Watkins's thematic concerns. The only secondary source for Kierkegaard is Walter Lowrie's A Short Life of Kierkegaard which Watkins possessed (W.T.W. Watkins, Letter) and which is the source for the translation of the journal entry from which the subtitle of the thesis is taken. Watkins possessed no other secondary sources on Kierkegaard (W.T.W. Watkins, Letter), and because the purpose of the thesis is to make a contribution to the literature on

Watkins and not to that on Kierkegaard, I have not found it necessary to include such sources.

In General, for Watkins and for Kierkegaard, I have cited the source in which I first found material. For Watkins's notes I have depended mainly on material quoted in Gwen Watkins's writings, although much of this material is collected in McCormick's unpublished M.A. thesis "The Prose of Vernon Watkins." This collection is the source for most, but not all, of the magazine pieces and articles. In citing the published poems, I have depended on the original collections, except in the case of those from Ballad of the Mari Lwyd and Other Poems, for which I have used the second edition, and those from The Breaking of the Wave (first published in book form by the Golgonooza Press in 1979), for which I have used The Collected Poems of Vernon Watkins, published by Golgonooza in 1986. Except for Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing and Works of Love, I have cited the editions of Kierkegaard's works possessed by Watkins (W.T.W. Watkins, Letter). Watkins owned the A.S. Aldworth and W.S. Ferrie translation Purify Your Hearts! (C.W. Daniel Co., 1937) and the Edna and Howard Hong translation of Works of Love (Harper & Row, 1962), but he must have studied Works of Love much earlier given the internal evidence in his "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" published in 1941. Since no complete English translation of Works of Love appeared until 1946, Watkins's original source would have been either a German translation or Walter Lowrie's

Kierkegaard published by Oxford University Press in 1938, two-fifths of which consists of quotations from Kierkegaard's works (Lowrie, Preface, A Short Life of Kierkegaard vii). Watkins's own copy of the book "has misprint corrections in pencil" (W.T.W Watkins, Letter) indicating familiarity with an earlier text.

CHAPTER I: "THE PIVOTAL CRISIS IN TIME"

Watkins's affinity for Kierkegaard was anchored in the experience that led to his recovery from the mental breakdown in 1927. Although he provided very few details about the nature of this experience, from his notes on its effect on his poetic theory and practice and from his description of the experience which he considered essential for a poet, it is possible to deduce that he understood it in the Kierkegaardian sense of a transformation effected by faith. The vocabulary he used privately to explain the change and the metaphor he used publicly to describe the poetic criteria he devised as a result of it both come from Kierkegaard.

The only apparently authoritative comments on the nature of Watkins's particular experience are ones by Gwen Watkins. In Portrait of a Friend she records Watkins's "conviction, acquired during his breakdown, that he had been saved from damnation by the sacrifice of Another, whom he identified as Christ" (13). No doubt the image of the dead motor-cyclist and the passenger's blood-stained face is behind the idea of sacrifice, but it is expressed in Kierkegaardian terms of the Atonement. In a discourse called "The High Priest," Kierkegaard wrote:

> For what else is the Atoner than a substitute (Stedfortraeder) who entirely

> puts himself in thy place?... So when retributive justice, either here on earth or hereafter at the day of Judgment, seeks the place where I a sinner stand with all my guilt -- it does not find me, I no longer stand in that place, Another stands in my place, Another who entirely puts himself in my place. For this I thank Thee, Lord Jesus Christ. (Three Discourses at the Communion on Fridays, Christian Discourses 369)

Watkins must have felt that he had been blessed with a vision of Christ's sacrifice in the motor-cycle accident outside his rooms. From Mathias's account of the incident (quoted earlier) it appears that at first he felt only a sense of personal responsibility, and it may have been this that he referred to as his faint view of the "abyss" (qtd. in Mathias, Vernon Watkins 28). However, during the time he spent at the nursing home, this vision was transfigured into one of joy, and what it amounted to was a personal acceptance of Christianity, at least of what Kierkegaard considered the essence of Christianity: faith that the eternal order has entered and redeemed the temporal. Belief in this "fact" of "the Paradox," as Kierkegaard's pseudonym Johannes Climacus terms it (Philosophical Fragments 120), meant that Watkins could accept as the work of God the "everyday world" that he had earlier despised for its worldliness, and could view his own suffering (obvious in his breakdown) as a necessary part of being human and, therefore, cut off from an immediate relationship with God. He had only to make what Kierkegaard calls the "leap of Faith" in order to come into relationship

with God or the eternal and to acquire that "transfigured vision of the world" that he "translate[s] into language" in his poems.

Watkins's experience may be described as a Christian "conversion," then, if one uses it in the sense that Climacus uses it in his hypothesis on the "disciple" who experiences the moment of faith:

> In so far as he was in Error he was constantly in the act of departing from the Truth. In consequence of receiving the condition in the moment the course of his life has been given an opposite direction, so that he is now turned about. Let us call this change Conversion .... (Philosophical Fragments 23)

Definition of the term is necessary not just to suggest the ground for Watkins's belief, but also to distinguish its use here from the rather more esoteric sense in which it is used by McCormick in her dissertation (8) and to answer objections to its use raised by other commentators. Mathias classifies Watkins's experience as "religious" but claims it "was not the Damascus Road turnabout that the word 'conversion' might suggest" (Vernon Watkins 28). Gwen Watkins had earlier suggested the comparison with St. Paul's experience, but she, too, said that it could not have been a conversion, "since he could never remember the time when he was not a Christian" ("Vernon Watkins 1906-1967" 16). Of course Watkins had been baptized and raised a Christian, and at Repton he had been confirmed into the Church of England

(Mathias, Vernon Watkins 13), but none of these things defines a Christian in the Kierkegaardian sense. In Philosophical Fragments Climacus argues that "this conversion [the change in direction in the life of a person who becomes a Christian] cannot take place without being taken up into the consciousness" and that "while it is indeed possible to be baptized en masse, it is not possible to be born anew en masse" (23; 24). In the Kierkegaardian literature the emphasis is on the "appropriation" of Faith by the individual rather than on ceremony or ritual; according to Mrs. Watkins, that was the nature of Watkins's experience:

> He was moving away from organic life into the world of poetry: but in his twenty-second year he underwent the experience which was to change the direction of his life and his poetry.... [H]is eyes were opened to the nature of Time and Eternity. ("Vernon Watkins 1906-1967" 16)

What is, for Kierkegaard, the only way to become a Christian became, for Watkins, the only way to become a poet: both demand a fundamental change in point of view from reason to faith. Among Watkins's rare explanations of his own poems, there is one in which he identifies the point of view of Christian faith as that which leads to a "transfigured vision of the world" such as he obtained from the experience of 1927-1928. In response to a request from the editors of Poet's Choice for a poem representative of his poetry, he wrote:

> I cannot pick a single poem to represent me better than others, so I pick one that is near the root of everything I write.... This poem ["Poet and Goldsmith"], with its very slight element of rhyme, is built upon the pivotal point between one way of writing and another. It is about nature and about transfigured nature. To those who have never looked through or beyond nature, if there are such people, it must be meaningless. Unredeemed nature can only offer to the poet a vista which leads to despair, and it is the liberation from that despair which is the motif of this poem and the substance of its exultation.... You may ... say that this poem is about Taliesin looking at the created universe from the standpoint of Christian faith, which I call the pivotal point between one way of writing and another. ("Commentary on 'Poet and Goldsmith'" 158)

There is much in this passage that reflects Watkins's affinity for Kierkegaard and some that suggests he is borrowing Kierkegaardian metaphors for Christianity as metaphors for poetry. Implicit in the passage is the Kierkegaardian idea that the relationship of man to God is "the spiritual relationship of inwardness," or faith, and that without this relationship or point of view man cannot obtain knowledge of God or proof of His existence from looking at creation. Looked at from the point of view of human reason, nature offers only an "objective uncertainty," and for that reason seeing God in the world depends on whether one believes. Some excerpts from the Concluding Unscientific Postscript by Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author Climacus (the source of the above quotations) will serve to clarify this point and

act as a gloss on Watkins's conception of Christian faith as a point of view for poetry:

> When subjectivity is the truth, the conceptual determination of the truth must include an expression for the antithesis to objectivity, a memento of the fork in the road where the way swings off; this expression will also indicate the tension of the subjective inwardness. Here is such a definition of truth: An objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual. Where the way swings off (and where this is cannot be specified objectively, since it is a matter of subjectivity), there objective knowledge is placed in abeyance. Thus, the subject merely has, objectively, the uncertainty; but it is this which precisely increases the tension of that infinite passion which constitutes his inwardness. The truth is precisely the venture which chooses an objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite. I contemplate nature in the hope of finding God, and I see everywhere omnipotence and wisdom; but I also see much else that disturbs my mind and excites anxiety. The sum of all this is an objective uncertainty. But it is for this very reason that the inwardness becomes as intense as it is ....
>
> But the above definition of truth is an equivalent expression for faith. Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe. (214-215)

Later in the Postscript, Climacus argues:

> Nature, the totality of created things, is the work of God. And yet God is not there; but within the individual man there is a potentiality (man is potentially spirit) which is awakened in inwardness to become a God-relationship, and then it is possible to see God everywhere. (225)

For both Kierkegaard and Watkins, faith is the only relief from the inevitable despair brought on by looking at the world with the critical eye of reason. Watkins's statement that one must look "through or beyond nature" with the eyes of "Christian faith" in order to see "transfigured nature" implies that if one looks at nature and without this mediating "infinite passion of ... inwardness," as Climacus expresses it, one is confronted with the "objective uncertainty" which is there but held in "abeyance" when one looks with the eyes of faith. Why else should one have to look "through or beyond nature"? It is the way of seeing that is important, and this point is reinforced by Watkins's use of the phrase "transfigured nature" which might be read as "the works [of God] as defined through an ideal interpretation, i.e., such as they do not immediately reveal themselves" (Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments 52). The same implication rests in Watkins's statements that "Unredeemed nature can only offer to the poet a vista which leads to despair" and that Taliesin's "standpoint of Christian faith" offers "liberation from that despair." For Watkins, as for Kierkegaard in the words of another pseudonym, Anti-Climacus, Christian faith is "the eternally certain antidote to despair" (The Sickness Unto

Death, Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death 173) since it provides another perspective on the temporal, one that recognizes the paradoxes of existence.

In his description of Christian faith as "the pivotal point between one way of writing and another" Watkins is using one of Kierkegaard's favourite metaphors for the Christian point of view. Kierkegaard first uses the metaphor of the "archimedean point" in his journal entry for July 29, 1835, in which he records a personal experience of the paradox of God's omnipotence and love:

> As one goes from the inn [at Gilleleie where Kierkegaard was spending the month] through Sortebro across the bare fields that run along the coast, about a mile and a quarter to the north one comes to the highest point in the district, to Gilbjerg....
>
> As I stood there, without that feeling of dejection and despondency which makes me look upon myself as the enclitic of the men who usually surround me, and without that feeling of pride which makes me into the formative principle of a small circle -- as I stood there alone and forsaken, and the power of the sea and the battle of the elements reminded me of my own nothingness, and on the other hand the sure flight of the birds recalled the words spoken by Christ: Not a sparrow shall fall on the ground without your Father: then did those two mighty forces, pride and humility, happily unite in friendship. Lucky is the man to whom that is possible at every moment of his life.... He has found what the great philosopher -- who by his calculations was able to destroy the enemy's engines of war -- desired, but did not find: that archimedean point from which he could lift the whole

> world, the point which for that very reason must lie outside the world, outside the limitations of time and space. (The Journals, Item 12)

In the same entry Kierkegaard identifies the "state of mind" described by the metaphor of the archimedean point as "true humility" (Item 20). Elsewhere in The Journals he says that "absolute silence ['in relation to God'] would be like a lever, or like the point outside the world which Archimedes talks about" (Item 1384). Again, in Works of Love, he locates this "point outside the world" in "inwardness" or the "conscience" which, he says, is "the relationship between the individual and God, the God-relationship" (116): this is the "Christian standpoint" from which the whole of nature is changed, although outwardly it remains the same (110-111). That Watkins was familiar with Kierkegaard's use of the metaphor is evident from the epithet "World-moving" by which he identified Kierkegaard as one of the writers who could offer hope to a child born near the beginning of World War II ("The Broken Sea: For my Godchild, Danielle Dufau-Labeyrie, born in Paris, May 1940," The Lamp and the Veil 60). That he had it in mind when he wrote the note on "Poet and Goldsmith" seems almost as certain, since he claims that the Christian point of view provides the poet with a vision of a transfigured world. Essentially, that is a summary of Kierkegaard's view of the effect of choosing Christianity, expressed in Works of Love.

Watkins was as fond of this metaphor as was Kierkegaard and applied it to the change that he believed to be necessary for a poet. He was not as reticent about the nature of this change as he was about his personal experience which seems to have been the model nonetheless. In an article called "The Second Pressure in Poetry," he wrote:

> I no longer associate art with the natural man. Metaphysically I have taken sides. I am interested only in poetry of the second pressure. True spontaneity, true art, seems to me to come, more often than not, long after the poem's first conception; it is the more powerful for being delayed and the purer for having been tried in the furnace of contraries. The poem cannot live until it has been willing to die.... Everything seems to me shallow that is not related to an inner experience which changed the man. There is always, in any serious poet, a moment of change, a pivotal crisis in time, that renews him. (161-162)

Even without a Kierkegaardian gloss to explain Watkins's choice of the phrase "pivotal crisis in time," the language of the passage suggests a New Testament analogy: "The poem cannot live until it has been willing to die." Out of context that statement is not only paradoxical but also incongruous. In less exalted language Watkins appears to be saying that the poet must be willing to revise a poem before it can express truth, or that a poem becomes a work of art only when it has been revised. It is the context that makes the statement less absurd than it appears on its own.

Watkins is thinking of a particular kind of revision tied to "an inner experience" which is the equivalent of a Christian conversion. It is the poet who must be "willing to die" to the "natural man" in "a moment of change, a pivotal crisis in time, that renews him" before he can create a poem that is a work of art. The poem (by which, in the above passage, Watkins appears to mean the poet) must experience a form of despair like that which Kierkegaard describes in The Sickness Unto Death: "The despair which is the passageway to faith is ... by way of the eternal: by the aid of the eternal the self has courage to lose itself in order to gain itself" (Fear and Trembling and The Sickness Unto Death 201). What the "pivotal crisis in time" amounts to is a change in the poet's point of view.

In the paragraph preceding the one quoted above Watkins equates art and truth: "I believe in the gifts of instant and unalterable truth which a poet cannot predict, and for whose coming he must wait" ("The Second Pressure in Poetry" 161). The Kierkegaardian assumption behind the statements in the paragraph quoted is that man is not related to this truth directly. The "natural man" is not a poet just as in Kierkegaard's view he is not a Christian. In order to become a poet, he must undergo the "inner experience" of rebirth. On this assumption Kierkegaard, through Climacus, provides a helpful gloss when he argues against "naturalization" of Christian faith:

> Faith may indeed become the second nature in a man, but the man in whom it becomes a second nature must surely have had a first nature, since Faith becomes the second.... [T]he doctrine that a man may be born with his second nature, a second nature involving a reference to a temporally dated historical fact, is a veritable non plus ultra of absurdity.... [T]he entire virtue of the consequences [of the birth of Christ] can redound to one's advantage only by means of a conversion. (Philosophical Fragments 116-122)

Watkins's description of the poet's regeneration as a "pivotal crisis in time" suggests that when he speaks of "the poem's first conception" (emphasis added) he is comparing it to man's "first nature": by extension, he is comparing the poet who has not experienced the change to a man who has not appropriated faith. The "gifts of ... truth" are given only to the poet who is prepared to accept them, and in practice the preparation consists of the willingness to revise "the poem's first conception," to replace words that suggest themselves on the rational level with those that come in what Watkins elsewhere calls "the moment of revelation," a moment that consists of "the swiftness of light rather than thought" ("W.B. Yeats -- The Religous Poet" 476). This relationship among the illogical revision, truth and faith is made more explicit in Watkins's analysis (to be discussed shortly) of the difference between Yeats's early and late styles, but it is implicit in what Watkins says above about "poetry of the second pressure" by which he seems to mean

(despite the Keatsean term?) the Kierkegaardian "immediacy after reflection" or "Faith" (The Journals, Item 754).

Watkins's most specific description of the required "crisis" or change in perspective is in an essay on Wilfred Owen in which he writes:

> Sooner or later in the life of every poet, there is a crisis, a revolution of heart, such as Keats described in The Fall of Hyperion, or Blake in the quatrain:
>
> > Each man is in his spectre's power
> > Until the arrival of that hour
> > When his Humanity awake
> > And cast his spectre into the Lake.
>
> ("The Poetry of Wilfred Owen" 210)

Watkins is likely thinking of the distinction Moneta makes in Keats's poem between the "dreamer" and the poet (1: 199-202) and between the "dreamer" and those

> "Who love their fellows even to the death,
> Who feel the giant agony of the world,
> And more, like slaves to poor humanity,
> Labour for mortal good...." (1: 156-159)

On March 19, 1819, in a letter journal to George and Georgiana Keats, Keats says he can recall only two men who possessed this "complete disinterestedness of Mind ... [this] pure desire for the benefit of others." The two are "Socrates and Jesus" ("To George and Georgiana Keats" 79). Although Keats probably would have objected to describing the "revolution of heart" that Watkins saw in The Fall of Hyperion as a Christian conversion (In the letter he is careful to refer

to the man Jesus and not Christ, and he corrected the clause "That he was so great as man" by crossing out the "s" in "as"[80]), he did see Jesus, as Kierkegaard most often did, as the model for men. Watkins, for whom Jesus is the Christ, would have interpreted as Christian the ideal humanity Keats extols, especially since the persona in Keats's poem "has felt / What 'tis to die and live again" (1: 141-142). Nor is he alone in interpreting the poem in a Christian context (See, for example, James 150).

There is no doubt that he considered Blake a Christian and, consequently, interpreted the lines he quotes as the description of a Christian conversion. He once described Dylan Thomas as "a Blakean Christian" (Gwen Watkins, Portrait 13). The lines he quotes from Blake are those etched in reverse on a scroll in the design accompanying the text on plate 41 of Jerusalem, Blake's last prophetic work. The lines are found also in Blake's Note-Book, but there the inclusion of the word "own" before "Spectre" (Poems and Fragments from the Note-Books 421) suggests that Watkins is quoting the copy from Jerusalem. In the context of that poem, the lines refer to the overthrow of "the Reasoning Power," with which the Spectre is identified (54:7), by the eternal poet Los (96:5-7). The Spectre is associated with "Despair" (10:51), "Doubt & Experiment;" Humanity is associated with "Belief ... & an unknown Eternal Life" (54:18; 24). The lines summarize the change in point of view from speculation

and doubt to faith, and the context is (more clearly than in The Fall of Hyperion) a Christian conversion: near the end of the poem, Blake's universal man, Albion, accepts Jesus as "Lord," "Divine Creator & Redeemer," and "Self [is] lost in the contemplation of faith" (96:3-5; 13; 31). Both poems speak of the necessity for suffering and self-sacrifice in the change in point of view from reason to faith. It is as a record of this change that Watkins used these poems: unlike Shelley who, Watkins says, "knew Hyperion, knew his pall / But did not know the unfinished Fall" ("In the Protestant Cemetery, Rome," Cypress and Acacia 94), Blake and Keats could speak, or could be made to speak, for the "pivotal point between one way of writing and another."

Had Watkins not read Kierkegaard on the significance of the "conscience" as the "Archimedean point" which Christianity provides, it would be difficult to understand his use of the term in the article "W.B. Yeats -- The Religious Poet." In the article Watkins attributes the difference between Yeats's early and late styles to a change in point of view brought on by a religious experience. Arguing that Yeats relied on oracles for all of his poems, Watkins insists that it is Yeats's attitude to the oracles, rather than the oracles themselves, that makes the late poetry a record of truth:

> If the oracles of the last poems are more true, it is because the poet brings worship and not speculation to his inquiry: doubt has been replaced by faith. (478)

This emphasis on the attitude rather than the object is quintessential Kierkegaard. The distinction is the one Climacus argues exists between the "how" and the "what" of an individual's relationship to the truth (Concluding Unscientific Postscript 213). Kierkegaard maintains that the "how" of the relationship determines the truth:

> When the question of the truth is raised subjectively, reflection is directed subjectively to the nature of the individual's relationship: if only the mode of this relationship is in the truth, the individual is in the truth, even if he should happen to be thus related to what is not true. (211)

Kierkegaard explains this point in a note:

> The reader will observe that the question here is about essential truth, or about the truth which is essentially related to existence, and that it is precisely for the sake of clarifying it as inwardness or subjectivity that this contrast is drawn. (211)

Clearly, the same definition of truth as "inwardness or subjectivity" underlies Watkins's comments on Yeats's attitude.

Clearly, also, Watkins makes the further Kierkegaardian distinction between this "Socratic position" or "Socratic Paradox," in which man is related to the truth directly and immediately through "recollection," and "Christianity [which] has declared itself to be the eternal essential truth which has come into being in time" in order to repair the "breach"

that it claims existence causes to be made in this immediate relationship. With the Christian qualification of "Original Sin," Kierkegaard argues, the definition becomes "absolutely paradoxical" since the individual has cut himself off from the eternal and cannot retrieve the eternal through "recollection." If he is to be related to the eternal it must be through God Himself, but when God has become man in the person of Jesus, "when the eternal truth has come into being in time," the eternal truth is itself paradoxical and not objectively recognizable as the truth; so the only possible relationship to it is faith:

> When the paradox is paradoxical in itself, it repels the individual by virtue of its absurdity and the corresponding passion of inwardness is faith.

For the Christian, then, "inwardness and subjectivity" is "faith" (215-222).

It has been noted already that Kierkegaard elsewhere equates Christian "inwardness" (or faith) with "conscience;" in the article on Yeats, Watkins uses "conscience" as another term to describe the difference in attitude in Yeats's early and late poems and he argues that the difference is evident in the nature of the revisions in the late works:

> While much of his early poetry seems to strain for a release from conscience, every poem in the late work is a test of conscience. Every question between Self and Soul is prompted by the religious

> sense.... Yeats as a craftsman laboured tirelessly; it is doubtful whether any other English lyric poet worked so hard at his revisions. Yet it was always upon the unforeseen that he relied, upon that unpredictable luck which is the reward of tenacity.... In the late poems it is noticeable that the last line of the poem is nearly always unpredictable; it holds the moment of conscience, and in all of the late work the moment determines the poem. It is the swiftness of light rather than thought; and the leap from the good work to the unalterable one may be seen in Yeats's revisions.... [T]he light is musically controlled. It is often found that most delicate revisions were made in words of different meaning but kindred sound ("Fire" became "five" at the end of "Those Images"), as though the statement had at first been imperfectly heard. (475-476)

He suggests that Yeats's late poetry passes the "test of conscience" in this "unpredictable correction that is so personal to the poet, so much a part of his soul" (477). What this means in Kierkegaardian terms is that Yeats's late work passes the test of Christian faith, and Watkins leaves no doubt that this is his meaning when he offers this explanation for the "miraculous element" (477) in the late poetry:

> [Yeats] has recorded for us in Autobiographies the moment when his imagination passed from paganism to Christianity, and this must have been the moment when the late work was conceived. (488)

He then quotes Yeats on his experience of Christian humility at Inky Wood and on his subsequent vision of God's "infinite" love. The similarity of this to Kierkegaard's experience at Gilbjerg (in which, in Kierkegaard's words, "those two mighty forces, pride and humility, happily unite in friendship") probably influenced Watkins's interpretation of Yeats's poetic development: Yeats had discovered Kierkegaard's "Archimedean," and Watkins's "pivotal," point from which to view the world and to reflect it in poetry.

CHAPTER II: "THE MOMENT KNOWN TO KIERKEGAARD"

It is not surprising that many of Watkins's own poems are celebrations of "the moment of faith," records of the change in imagination from paganism to Christianity. Some of these appear to be imaginative recreations of Watkins's own experience; others are pure inventions, mythological accounts of the nature and significance of the Kierkegaardian "conversion." The poems on this theme discussed below are chosen in part because they demonstrate some of the strengths and weaknesses in Watkins's handling of technique in a variety of forms.

To the first group belong the poems about figures from the New Testament, especially the lepers healed by Christ. Both Kierkegaard and Watkins chose the leper as a persona. Kierkegaard used the figure in "The Leper's Soliloquy" in his last aesthetic work, Stages on Life's Way. Leprosy was his apt and witty metaphor for the melancholy from which he suffered for most of his life, the disease which prevented his marrying Regine Olsen. An entry in The Journals suggests that he adopted the leper persona as a form of therapy for the illness: "I will try to rid myself of all the black thoughts and dark passions within me by writing 'The Leper's meditation'" (Item 447). That the writing did not provide the immediate cure he sought is clear from confessions

recorded in the journal years later. In the first of two related entries, he says that he must "dare to believe that [he] can be saved by Christ from the power of melancholy in which [he had] lived" (Item 936); in the second, he records his "awakening" to faith in Christ as healer:

> Only now can I say that I have come to understand Christ as a Saviour who helps one out of one's misery and not merely a Saviour who helps one to bear it. (Item 937)

Like Kierkegaard, Watkins found the cure for his illness (the mental breakdown) in faith in Christ's redemptive power. That he saw the leper as a persona is indicated by one of the choices of a title for his first volume of poems. In a note on Dylan Thomas's reference to his "leprous collection," Watkins explains: "I had at this time suggested the title Gratitude of a Leper for my first book of poems which was afterwards called Ballad of the Mari Lwyd and Other Poems" (Dylan Thomas: Letters to Vernon Watkins 101). The unused title could serve for the Collected Poems since his work was what he offered in appreciation of his spiritual health.

No poem in his first book is concerned exclusively with Christ's healing of the leper, although it is implied in the ballad of the title (which will be discussed in the next chapter). Mathias reports that the proposed title poem was

never published but exists in manuscript. From it he quotes these four lines:

> And because I am healed by the Instant, the period
> Of the planet is subject till death to my listening soul.
> I am shaken by a deluge of light. The glory of God
> Entered by a beam in the night, and my flesh is made whole. (qtd. in "Grief and the Circus Horse" 123)

One does not regret Watkins's decision not to publish this poem. There is little in this quatrain (except perhaps "listening soul") that is memorable or original. In meeting the demands of rhyme and meter, Watkins seems to have forgotten, or been willing to sacrifice, his usual rhythmic strength in which line endings play an important part. The too pat "deluge of light" and "beam in the night" must make Blake at least twitch since it recalls his "vision" of Milton entering the tarsus of his left foot, and Blake is not a poet easily copied. What is significant for the purpose of the present discussion is the clause "because I am healed by the Instant." The "Instant," capitalized, is another term for Kierkegaard's "Moment in time," the decisive Christian point of view which claims that "the eternal, which hitherto did not exist, came into existence in this moment" (Philosophical Fragments 16). In other words, Christ was born, and man was saved from "Sin" or "Error" by the "Atonement" (16). In the quatrain quoted Watkins emphasizes the Atonement. The leper says he has been "healed by the Instant," and there is the suggestion

of passive acceptance on the part of the one healed. Such passivity is consistent with Watkins's account of his own religious experience (quoted earlier): it was in part a vision of the Atonement in what Kierkegaard (perhaps ignoring the difference between physical and spiritual wholeness) calls its "objective reality":

> The objective reality of Christ's atonement, independent of its subjective appropriation, is most clearly shown in the history of the ten lepers -- They were all of them healed, though only of the tenth who thankfully returned to give honour to God, is it said: Thy faith hath made thee whole. What was it that cured the others? (The Journals, Item 223)

Yet "the Moment" had an added significance for both Kierkegaard and Watkins. It is also the moment when man accepts the condition for understanding the Truth: it is the moment of faith. The point needs to be stressed, for Watkins, like Kierkegaard, not only emphasizes the Fall and the Redemption but also argues for the necessity of man's "appropriation" of the Incarnation. What he understood by "the Instant" is more explicitly conveyed in the poem of that title published in Uncollected Poems (24). In it he seems to speak more directly than in any other of his own conversion. He refers to the "Instant of truth that killed remorse" as "a gift" unexpectedly received when he was "led" only by "the drift / Of creatures towards decay," but he ends with a statement of the acceptance without which the gift is useless:

That word of buried light was true
And set my feet above
The cobbled flames the sunrise threw
Reflected in the dove:
There was no creature, none that grew
Excluded from His love.

Belief in the truth of Christ, whose words on the sparrow and man's importance to God are recalled in the last two lines, is what led to the speaker's sense of release from the world of transience.

The difficulty Watkins had in translating his experience into poetry, or at least the difficulty some readers have in responding to his experience, is evident in the stanza quoted from this poem as it is in some of the other poems to be explored in this chapter. The poem begins as a direct address to the Instant, but by this third and last stanza, the speaker is talking about, rather than to, "that word of buried light." This inconsistency in the structure is confusing, and when it is combined as it is here with what seems to be lack of concern for dissonant associations in a metaphoric image, the effect is disconcerting. The third line is a pretty image of sunrise on a cobble-stone street, but the fourth seems to contradict its intent and lessen its force as a metaphor for the physical or natural world. While it is effective in conveying the freedom of imagination the speaker experiences in accepting the "buried light" in the grave, the sky (home of the dove) being a natural contrast in height to the grave, the line is disturbing since in

Christianity the dove has too long been associated with the Holy Spirit (and indeed Watkins himself uses it in this connection in other poems) to be used as part of a metaphor for the physical which is transcended by Christianity. Or does Watkins mean the fourth line to modify the first as it would were it placed before or after it? As it stands and without punctuation (over which he was extremely fussy), however, it does not read like a statement of faith in Christ on the testimony of the Holy Spirit; it reads as part of the image of height, perhaps the highest and most beautiful offered by the natural, which is transcended by faith in Christ's birth and death.

There are two published poems by Watkins on the subject of Christ's healing of the leper: "The Healing of the Leper" in his third book, The Lady With the Unicorn (77-78), and "Hymn (The Leper's Healing)" in Uncollected Poems (23). According to Kathleen Raine this last selection contains poems on which he was working just before his death (Introduction i). The two poems invite comparison and an examination of Watkins's technique since they may be considered two versions of the same poem. Both appear to have had their genesis in Watkins's study of Botticelli's The Temptation of Christ in the Sistine Chapel which includes a scene explained in guidebooks as "the cleansing of the leper" but which is, according to L.D. and Helen S. Ettlinger, "an Old Testament blood sacr ice, probably illustrating a passage from the

Epistle to the Hebrews (ch. ix)" (59). Watkins seems to have accepted the information in the guidebook. He included the first poem in a reading called "The Poet's Voice" and prefaced it with these explanatory comments:

> The last poem I have chosen for this talk also celebrates the moment, this time the moment of faith, the moment which is decisive for life and death at the same time. The lofty thought of the Greek Philosopher Plotinus seemed to me to be transcended by an image in a painting by Botticelli, by a face whose Christian faith expressed a willingness to die and live at the same time. (A Rehearsal Script 25)

As a statement of subject and theme, the comments are applicable to the second as well as the first, but there the similarity between the two versions of the same experience ends.

The second poem is much less effective than the first: it is much less focused on the image and does not communicate itself as a felt experience. The most obvious difference is that the first is addressed directly to the reader whereas the second is, or seems at its beginning to be, an apostrophe to Christ. The first involves one immediately by addressing the individual:

> O, have you seen the leper healed,
> And fixed your eyes upon his look?
> There is the book of God revealed,
> And God has made no other book. (77)

The second opens with this quiet address to Christ:

> Fountain of life whose face we love,
> The leper, healed, gives thanks to Thee.
> His eyes are fixed, and will not move
> From that clear spring which makes him see.

The superiority of the first is evident in the first lines. In the second poem the phrase "Fountain of life" is trite, a cliché of religious praise. The triteness is extended into the fourth line in "clear spring." By contrast, the first line of the other demands a response, and one's attention is kept in the next line with the second verb of the compound question. The first thing one notes is that the word "fixed" gains more force by including the first stress in this line. In the second poem the same word, used in the third line, is the second stress, and the voice is passive. The placement and the voice of the verb in the first poem both mirror its concern: the attempt to express the effect of a concrete image upon the speaker-poet. The focus in this poem is clearly upon the image of the leper in the painting and upon conveying the impression of faith received from it.

The contrast between concrete detail and abstract statement is evident throughout the two poems. Of the two descriptions of the healing, the one in the first poem is by far the better. Sound reflects the visual in this image of the moment of faith:

> The withered hand which time interred
> Grasps in a moment the unseen. (77)

The "clogging" internal rhyme "withered ... interred" and the emphasis on the rather harsh "Grasps" of the second line (harsh, that is, compared to the "fingers touched the watery sheet" of the second poem) are notable sound and rhythmic effects of which Watkins was aware no doubt since he advised his students at the University of Washington: "In rhyming lines, don't rhyme only at [the] end; rhyme all through" (La Belle 105). The placement of "Grasps" in this line and of "Bursting" in the third line of the next stanza are reminiscent of both Owen and Hopkins whose poetry Watkins admired for similar effects. The pause between "interred" and "Grasps" embodies in technique the "shock" he tells us about in the last stanza of the second poem, and the change in rhythm reflects the contrast between slow physical decay and instantaneous spiritual rebirth.

Details of several New Testament miracle stories (the healings of the single leper, the ten lepers and the man with the withered hand) are fused in this image of mortality seizing the eternal. The fusion extends to the levels on which the image operates. On the literal level, the leper's hand seems to be independent of the "eyes, transfixed above," and this impression serves to reinforce one's perception of the poet's understanding of this moment as an act of faith, a way of seeing that is different from the sensual. On the figurative level, the leper's "withered hand" is conceived of as buried in time, and it is paradoxically this death in

time which clutches at eternal life. The word "unseen" is also figurative, of course, and points once again to the leper's faith. While witnesses of the miracle may have been led to follow Christ on the basis of what they saw, the leper had to trust that this man of ordinary appearance was really "the God in time."

By contrast, the corresponding lines in the second poem, besides being less arresting in sound, are less memorable as an image of "Christian faith express[ing] a willingness to die and live at the same time." Still addressing Christ in the second stanza, the speaker says of the leper:

> He heard Thy words, he turned his feet;
> He passed the impulsive, pressing crowd.
> His fingers touched the watery sheet.
> He found Thee there, and cried aloud.

The softness and tentativeness of "touched," its placement in the line and the past tense together with the consciously large symbolism of "watery sheet," make this description in the second poem seem less immediate, less personal, and certainly less forceful as a depiction of that "willingness to die" which Watkins first saw in the image. There is clearly less suggestion of risk in "fingers touch[ing] the watery sheet" than there is in "The withered hand ... / Grasp[ing] ... the unseen," and there is less of surprise and awe, too, since one expects the leper to find none other than Christ in that "watery sheet."

The difference in language is reflected in the difference in structure. Whereas the first has organic unity, moving from specific to general throughout, the second is unbalanced, and even careless, in its arrangement. The first remains focused clearly on the image of the face and hand in the painting. The speaker's generalizations are rooted in the concrete images. Even the turn in the poem in the last two stanzas, which prepares for the lesson in the final line ("'Be nothing, first; and then, be love'") is tied to the image and is introduced by a direction to the reader to examine it more closely: "But look: his face is like a mask" (77-78). By contrast, the second poem strikes one as looser. Even the stanzas describing the image of the leper in the painting (that is, the first two stanzas which have been quoted in full above) seem superfluous when addressed to Christ rather than to the reader. The last four stanzas are even more incongruous. The third, fourth and fifth explain <u>for Christ</u> the significance of the leper's act. The third, for example, opens:

> Life, the reward, was not denied
> To one to whom no man gave place.

The fourth has moved farther from the image in the painting and farther surely from the object of the apostrophe:

> Our lives run counter to the wheel,
> Nor may the soul find peace, unless
> It wait on God, whose words reveal
> Clear waters which alone can bless.

It is one thing to preach to man; it is clearly another to preach to "the Teacher" who has given the condition for understanding this "truth," and this stanza replaces one less preachy in tone and more conscious of the beauty and effect of particulars: "the river where we bathe," for instance, is a more tactile and apt image of cleansing than "Clear waters." It is true that the sixth stanza returns to the address in the form of a prayer for the Second Coming, and the poet's stance is, therefore, no longer absurd, but the last two lines are still abstract:

> Shine, risen Christ: perfect our love.
> Raise us from death, and find us healed.

In the first poem he trusted the image of the dead hand "Grasp[ing]" to convey that prayer.

The obvious question is why Watkins chose to work on a second version of this poem when the second is not as good as the first. Raine offers one explanation when she comments on Watkins's revisions in other poems:

> What Vernon Watkins seems to have worked for was the elimination of naturalism on the one hand, and abstraction on the other: all must be transposed into image, but an imagery released from time and occasion. (Introduction ii)

This is a difficult task indeed, and it is not one that Watkins was able to do successfully in the second of the two

leper-healed poems. Of course the difference between the two poems in language and approach may be explained by the title of the second poem which indicates that it is a song of praise to Christ. Perhaps what bothers me about this poem, though, is that it seems to me to preach more than to praise and to include in its language little that is fresh. The transfigured world remains abstract: its images lose their force and appear trite when they are used in place of, and not as part of, a dynamic structure.

Watkins is more effective when he creates a dramatic situation such as he does in "Cantata for the Waking of Lazarus" (The Death Bell: Poems and Ballads 63-65), a lyric drama enacting the raising of Lazarus by Christ, and "Quem Quaeritis (Poem for Voices)" (Affinities 84-85), a variation on one of the first recorded tropes or liturgical dramatizations, the Easter Quem Quaeritis trope. Both poems depict moments of faith: the first celebrates the victory of faith over reason; the second records faith in Christ's Resurrection and in the promise of life through death.

Unlike the original Quem Quaeritis which dramatizes the Biblical account of the meeting of the three women with the Angel at the Holy Sepulchre, Watkins's is an imaginary meeting between five identifiable Biblical characters, all of whom were healed of physical or mental affliction by Christ during His ministry, and an unidentified questioner who may be one of the guards at the empty tomb. Like the original,

it is responsorial in form and begins with the question: "Whom do you seek?" The responses are invented by Watkins to retell, from the point of view of the principals and using some of the Biblical phrasing, five of the New Testament miracle stories in five quatrains. The stories of the blind man cured at Bethsaida, the leper who returned to give thanks, the woman cured of haemorrhage, the man freed from demons at Gerasa and the deaf-mute healed in the district of the Ten Cities are all meant to name Jesus in response to the question, but they are also meant, as they are in the evangelists' accounts, to identify him as the Christ and to emphasize the part played by faith in the cures. The quatrain spoken by the woman cured of haemorrhage will serve to illustrate these points and the simplicity (what Watkins referred to as the lack of "Excess Luggage" in another poem [Uncollected Poems 16]) characteristic of these accounts:

> 'I was so hidden, my hand He could not see
> When, in that press of people, on my knee
> I touched His garment; yet my life was known.
> That moment from affliction I went free.' (84)

This same faith is evident in the characters now seeking "Him who has overcome the tomb" (85). The poem works in part through this progression from testimony of Christ's ability to heal the physically ill to belief in His power to free man from mortality itself and to do so paradoxically through death.

The really dramatic figure in the poem, however, is the questioner who begins and ends the poem with the same question which he asks also at the end of each response: "Whom do you seek?" Were it not for the fact that the poem is framed in this way by his question, one could dismiss him as a mere technical device used to elicit the testimony of the five respondents and having no thematic significance. The question at the end gives him a personality. One may see the poor fellow only as either deaf himself or obtuse. The second is surely what Watkins intends in order to dramatize the limits of the rational response to the empty tomb which the questioner illustrates in what are probably the most memorable lines in the poem. These are the lines with which the poem opens, but they are understood in the repetition of the question at its end:

> Whom do you seek? No life is in this ground
> The napkin stained and linen clothes lie round.
> Here is no fountain but a land of dearth
> Where thorns forget the forehead they have crowned.
> Whom do you seek? (84)

One assumes that the pathetic fallacy is intentionally satirical and meant to convey the questioner's mockery. Otherwise, it is not one that only Ruskin would deplore. If this character is meant to represent all those who doubted or "denied Him" (84), the "They" referred to by the respondents in their choral last stanza (85), one would imagine that the tone of his question is exasperated and progresses from annoyance

to anger. In any case, his continued doubt merely serves to show that belief is a matter of faith. The miracles do not do away with the necessity for faith in the Christian's relationship to Christ; rather, they point to it. In method, the poem is like a miniature Kierkegaardian Either/Or in which technique reflects content. The reader is left with a choice as he is in Kierkegaard's works, and that in itself is an affirmation of "inwardness" or "subjectivity" as Truth.

In "Cantata for the Waking of Lazarus" Watkins is governed more than in "Quem Quaeritis" by the Biblical narrative, but his slight departures from it again serve to place at the heart of the story the one who is helped. The poem contains a cluster of those large symbols of which Watkins is so fond: immortality and resurrection are depicted in the fountain, the doves, white roses and white acacia; but the poem does not depend only on its symbols to convey its theme. In this poem the symbols serve to reinforce rather than carry the meaning.

In the opening stanza the song of the fountain is an oracle telling of the life that Lazarus enjoys in death:

> The fountain cried that he, in that grave shadow sleeping
> Alone could see God's face, and blind with sun were they
> Who climbed the mountain slowly on the rocky way. (63)

The mourners are associated with the sun which is here a symbol of the rational view that death is the end. The

first stanza concludes by placing Jesus in contrast with this rational view which blinds the mourners to the eternal that Lazarus perceives:

> Now did the sun climb heaven, but one who cast a shade
> Seeing a white crowd near the tomb-mouth with much weeping
> Prayed for him with closed eyes; with love's great strength he prayed. (63)

The clause "cast a shade" is a good, economical description of "the God-Man" since it alludes to Jesus' humanity at the same time that it focuses attention on His divinity. Anticipating both the eclipse reported to have accompanied Christ's own death and the one prophesied to come at the end of the world, it suggests that Christ, like Lazarus' "grave shadow" (mentioned earlier in the poem), blocks out the blinding sun and causes the change in perspective that will allow the mourners and His Apostles, brought along for this purpose, to believe in the promise of "their own last resurrection" (mentioned later in the poem [64]) that He embodies.

The testimony of the fountain and the arrival of Jesus at the tomb is followed by two stanzas of dialogue consisting of Jesus' summons and Lazarus' initial response. The summons is expanded by Watkins into a beautiful bit of poetry. Using alliteration and assonance and images of the beauty of life arising from darkness, Christ reminds Lazarus that a

new covenant has been formed in Him and that the whole of creation is reborn in it:

> A winding-sheet has veiled the silence of love's glory,
> Earth purified by love, no life not full of light;
> Sleep in the sepulchre, believe that ancient story,
> That ancient sun believe, on Moses' tablets raying,
> Yet see these petals breaking near the source, and white
> Roses on thorny stems, and white acacia swaying
> Where glinting birds alight above the ringing cup.
> Crumble this crust of birth to throw to ring-doves playing.
> Rise through the waking Earth; Lazarus dead, rise up. (63)

Lazarus' reply is unexpected since it does not occur in the Biblical account. It serves to make Lazarus a more important figure in the drama of his resurrection and to make of it a test of his faith. Although he professes his faith in Jesus as God, he hesitates before giving up the promise of the old covenant for the new:

> The Romans drove you out, they hunted you with spears,
> Yet you have pieced my flesh, have knit me, bone to bone,
> Have kindled here this force, behind the sombre stone,
> To wake, yet not to wake, who hear that holy stave. (64)

His hesitation leads to a tense moment depicted in the next stanza when the question of man's resurrection appears to hang in the balance:

> Then, as the people passed, the fountain ceased from leaping,

> While yet unwakened by the Son of God he slept.
> By this were many gathered by the tomb-mouth with much weeping,
> Then did the fountain stop. That moment Jesus wept. (64)

Having Jesus weep in this pause between the summons and Lazarus' resurrection, and not before He approached the tomb as He does in the Gospel account (John II:35), makes it seem as if all is lost in this moment and adds to the effect of the next moment when Lazarus now unexpectedly appears before the gathered crowd who are shocked into recognizing "that their own last resurrection had come near."

It is not clear whether it is the members of this group (now presumably followers) or the narrator who ends the poem with a prayer for the Second Coming using the "Come" of Revelation 22:17-20 and 1 Corinthians 22 as a refrain. It is worth noting, in the light of McCormick's interpretation of Lazarus as "Watkins' archetype of the perfect mystic" ("'I Sing'" 210), that the last line in the prayer "And let me see your eyes; love, newly born, come down" (65) reflects the promise in Revelation: "They shall see him face to face" (22:4). The desire expressed is <u>not</u> for mystical communion with God but for actual knowledge of God such as is not, Watkins and Kierkegaard believed, possible before death. It is Lazarus "four days dead" who "Alone could see God's face." Like Kierkegaard, Watkins is a mystic only insofar as he celebrates faith in "the Paradox" over rational arguments. For the rest -- the desire for eternity -- he would agree

with Kierkegaard that "Mysticism has not the patience to wait for God's revelation" (The Journals, Item 321).

The conversion from paganism to Christianity, which is understood in the other poems analyzed above, is depicted in the last stanza of "Cantata for the Waking of Lazarus" in the image of the mythic figure Triton playing "his winding horn" for Christ (65). A note on this figure written by Watkins to a student will serve also as a summary description of the theme of the poem:

> I take, I think, the fountain as a symbol of what recreates itself and transcends time. The Triton is involved in the mystery of water, which can renew, transfigure, and raise from death. I imagine, perhaps, the horn of resurrection held by the Triton over the font of birth. This is living time casting out dead time, continually, in the transfiguration of water, which corresponds, in my poem, to faith in eternal life casting out the rational acceptance of death. (qtd. in Pryor, Rev. 227)

While Watkins was willing to reconcile the pagan Triton to Christ in this way, he was not willing to do the same for Charon whom he used to represent the despair of pre-Christian belief in life after death from which the speaker of the sonnet "Christ and Charon" (Cypress and Acacia 57) is rescued by Christ's Incarnation. The contrast between the two ways of looking at death is developed in this poem in two extended comparisons: death in the pagan underworld is compared in the first four lines of the octave to being stranded on a

shore filled with "terrors" that outnumber the waves of the turbulent sea while waiting vultures circle Charon's boat and to being paralyzed in a "nightmare;" salvation through Christ is compared to ships arriving for a rescue and to awaking from the horrible dream at dawn. The first line and a half of the second quatrain of the octave introduces the second metaphor at the same time that it continues the first (in the root meaning "ships" for "naves") and records the inner change from despair to faith: "I left that nightmare shore, and woke to naves of daybreak."

The contrast is developed in the first three lines of the sestet in three contrasting images of smell, touch and sound, respectively. The second of these, the tactile image of "sweat of horror" changed to "holy gum," completes the metaphor of the release from nightmare. The last three lines serve to explain the source of the change in an image of angels above Christ in the cradle that is in balanced contrast to the image of vultures above Charon in his boat which dominates the first four lines of the poem. Harbingers of death are replaced by announcers of life whose "sigh[s]" are reflected in the soft sighing sound in all of the end rhymes in the sestet. The sound is a fitting suggestion of the calmed waters, but the comparison of "sigh" and "ship destined to calm" used in the last line to complete the rescue-from-storm metaphor is rather strained.

Unlike the other poems discussed above, this poem has no basis in time or actuality and must be understood on its symbolic or figurative level. In this respect it is closer to those poems in which Watkins creates a mythology of Christian conversion centering on the Usk and its environs, the home of two of "the three primitive baptismal bards of the Cambro-Britons" including "Taliesin ... of Caerlleon upon Usk" (Iolo MSS, Guest 498). One of these is "Taliesin and the Spring of Vision" (Cypress and Acacia 20-21) which takes Taliesin as its subject. It is significant because, as documented earlier, Watkins saw Taliesin as "the archetype of inspiration" for Welsh poetry. It is one of seven published poems and several drafts that Ruth Pryor examines in order to show the development, in Watkins's treatment of the legend, from "bardic stance" to rejection of it in this poem in favour of "remain[ing] a human being subject to the divinely ordained laws of human life" ("The Pivotal Point in Poetry: Vernon Watkins and the Taliesin Legend" 55; 56). Her analysis supports the present interpretation of the poem as a record of the change in imagination from paganism to Christianity. Pryor says that it was originally part of a series of four poems in which "Watkins was to mould the Christian elements in the Taliesin legend in his own way, and to develop them according to his own view of his role as a poet" (53).

She has noted the way in which Watkins has reshaped the myth so that "the three drops" which are the source of

Taliesin's inspiration fall not from Caridwen's cauldron and not on Taliesin as the boy Gwion, as they do in the legend, but from the rock of the cave on the mature Taliesin (56). This may be the most important detail in Watkins's reshaping since it serves to suggest that Taliesin received his true inspiration not from Caridwen who is "generally considered to be the Goddess of Nature of Welsh mythology" (Guest, "Notes to Taliesin" 500) but from the "rock" of Christianity in which he "took refuge" from "the sand of the hour-glass" (20) which seems to be an image of time or nature in its unredeemed state. Pryor says (rightly, I think) that the "rock ... symbolizes in all these poems the saving stability of revealed truth and hence the source of poetic inspiration," although, as she notes, the rock in this case is "'unfledged'" (55). She says that the rock here then "seems to represent the inspiration of truth yet unrevealed, because the time is not ripe" (55). Perhaps she is thinking (although she does not say that she is) of the fact that the three drops have not fallen on Taliesin at this point in the poem. That would account for the fact that the rock is "unfledged." It would not explain, however, the remainder of this, the second, stanza or the next, both of which suggest that Taliesin now knows the truth of eternity. In this stanza, the speaker who is interpreting Taliesin's experience says,

> And the rock he touched was the socket of all
> men's eyes,
> And he touched the spring of vision. He had the

> mind of a fish
> That moment. He knew the glitter of scale and
> fin.
> He touched the pin of pivotal space, and he saw
> One sandgrain balance the ages' cumulus cloud. (20)

Here again is that image of the Kierkegaardian "Archimedean point" or the Christian point of view found "outside time and space" in "inwardness" or "the conscience" which was discussed in detail in the first chapter.

Despite the fact that the rock is "unfledged," then, it seems to represent "the saving stability of revealed truth," and this suggestion is reinforced by Watkins's modification of another detail in the legend not noted by Pryor. In the story told in The Mabinogion the boy Gwion Bach attempts to escape the angry Caridwen by transforming himself into various forms of life. At one point "he ran towards the river, and became a fish" (472). In the poem it is the mature Taliesin who, as a result of having touched the rock, "had the mind of a fish / That moment" (20). Perhaps Watkins means to suggest that in the "cave" (another symbol of "inwardness") of the conscience Taliesin has come into relationship with Christ for whom the fish is one symbol and the rock another.

If the truth of the rock is as yet unrevealed to Taliesin how does one account for his perception of the significance of man's life as part of "the pattern" originating in the Redemption through love (21)? Taliesin's first perception of the significance of man's brief existence in time comes

at the end of the second stanza and is suggested in this metaphor: "he saw / One sandgrain balance the ages' cumulus clouds" (20). The Blakean metaphor works in part through its image of relative weight (the heaps of clouds not tipping the scale) and in part through its image of relative height which refers again to the combination of humility and pride in the Christian point of view. In the next stanza Taliesin himself speaks of the eternal order in nature which is not visible to man except through the inner eye of the conscience (man's potential to be spirit according to Kierkegaard, as noted earlier). This experience of the rejection of the rational in favour of faith is accompanied by the now familiar eclipse of the sun, another indication that the rock is meant to represent "the revealed truth" of Christianity:

> Earth's shadow hung. Taliesin said: 'The penumbra
> of history is terrible.
> Life changes, breaks, scatters. There is no
> sheet-anchor.
> Time reigns; yet the kingdom of love is every
> moment,
> Whose citizens do not age in each other's eyes.'
> (20)

From the point of view of human reason all seems flux and attributable only to the "Chance" mentioned in the first stanza, God does not appear in the natural world, and man is mutable; but from the point of view of Christian faith, the "pin of pivotal space," Taliesin perceives an order or a pattern to life in <u>the</u> love that is eternal. The definite article is required before "love" because for Watkins only

Christian love is eternal. In the "Note on the Death Bell" he writes: "The pathos of pre-Christian love is in its incompleteness ..." (The Death Bell: Poems and Ballads 111). The comment might have been written by Kierkegaard since it is a summary of his thesis in Works of Love that the Christian commandment to love is the only assurance of eternal love:

> "Thou shalt love." Only when it is a duty to love, only then is love everlastingly secure against change; everlastingly emancipated in blessed independence; everlasting happy, assured against despair. (1: 25))

Although the statement about eternal youth in "the kingdom of love" may be attributed to others besides Kierkegaard(some commentators, including Pryor commenting on a similar statement in another of the Taliesin poems, attribute it to Heraclitus) or to no one, what Taliesin says in the remainder of the stanza suggests that Watkins has Kierkegaard in mind:

> 'In a time of darkness the pattern of life is restored
> By men who make all transience seem an illusion
> Through inward acts, acts corresponding to music.
> Their works of love leave words that do not end in the heart.' (21)

Not only does the phrase "works of love" in the last line of the stanza appear to be an allusion to Kierkegaard's book by that title, but also a reference to Kierkegaard's own "Christian work of love," as he termed it, in inviting ridicule in the

Corsair ("My Activity as a Writer," The Point of View 148) and more specifically to his reflection in his journals on the rightness of Luther's conception of "faith" and Christian "love" which is sandwiched between entries concerned with the nature of his own writings:

> Luther is right again in this. No one can see faith, it is invisible, so that no one can decide whether a man has faith. But faith shall be known by love. Now people have of course tried to make love into something invisible, but against that Luther protests with the Scriptures; for to the Christian love is the works of love .... Christ's love was not an inner feeling, a full heart and what not, it was the work of love which was his life. (The Journals, Item 932)

When one compares the last line of the stanza quoted and the last line of this entry in Kierkegaard's journal it is clear that Watkins was quoting the second as closely as his line length would permit. In the context of the poem, Watkins has his spokesman Taliesin praise those poets who "through inward acts, acts corresponding to music" follow the example of Christ.

The allusion is reinforced by the reference to "the 'Pattern'" (in the first line of the stanza excerpt) which recalls Kierkegaard's insistence on Christ as "the Pattern" and especially his use of the term in reference to "human equality" in The Point of View:

> ... [T]he "Pattern," and all the relative patterns constantly being formed in correspondence with it, each of them individually, attained, at the cost of many years of exertion, of labour, of disinterestedness, the end of becoming as nothing in this world, of being derided, mocked etc.... (Preface, "'The Individual': Two 'Notes' Concerning My work as an Author," The Point of View 107)

From the context it is clear that Kierkegaard is thinking of his own work as a "poet" of Christianity, and it seems equally clear that it is to such "works of love" as the writings of Kierkegaard that Watkins refers.

The fourth stanza in which the "three drops" finally fall on Taliesin's "fingers" seems somewhat of an anticlimax (21) since not only has touching the rock led to "Future and past converg[ing] in a lightning flash" for Taliesin (otherwise, what explains his earlier perception of "the pattern of life"?), but also it would appear, from what the "sand of the hour-glass" says in the first stanza, that Taliesin is in possession of the "secret" of "the soul's rebirth" even before he enters the cave and touches the rock:

> '"Your tears which have dried to Chance, now spring
> from a secret.
> Here time's glass breaks, and the world is
> transfigured in music."' (20)

One might well ask what need Taliesin has of the rock or the drops in this case. What may be evident here is a confusion in metaphor as well as a problem in structure. Only if the "sand of the hour-glass" is taken as an image for Time --

threatening decay and death -- does it make sense for Taliesin to take "refuge" from it in the "cave" of his "conscience" where he may tap his "spirit" and be free from time's threat. The confusion here lies in the fact that the sand does not seem such a threatening thing. It seems not a symbol of time but of human life that is freed from time in the "secret" where "time's glass breaks." Why, then, does Taliesin seek shelter from it as if it were a life-threatening force?

One is left with that confusion, but it may be said of the "three drops" that they are needed in the poem since they show the reward Taliesin receives for his faith, however acquired. They are a form of baptism admitting Taliesin to the fellowship of poets and artists whose work Watkins considered eternal. They are his inspiration to become one of Kierkegaard's "relative patterns" whose desired end is to follow Christ in humility and suffering, which means, for both Kierkegaard and Watkins, to give up earthly ambitions and become a writer whose only ambition is to serve the truth of the "rock." This desire explains Taliesin's response to the baptism, recorded in the last two lines:

> 'Christen me, therefore, that my acts in the dark
> may be just,
> And adapt my partial vision to the limitation
> of time.' (21)

Although the poets named as ones so christened are Shakespeare, Dante and Blake, it is Kierkegaard's thought that informs the request. Whether he knew it or not, in this insistence

on humility as the proper Christian attitude before God, Watkins is far from Blake's conception of "Divine Humanity" which sounds as if it might be another term for Kierkegaard's "the God-Man" but is really its opposite, the Man-God. In Watkins man as man is not exalted to the position of God. He comes into relationship with God only through the humility of faith in God's love, and it is this love expressed by God coming into being in time or descending ("the God-Man") which allows him that relationship if he chooses to receive it.

By claiming only "partial vision" Taliesin alludes to the loss of immediate knowledge of God that both Kierkegaard and Watkins saw as the crux of the change in point of view from paganism to Christianity. This change is recorded as the last of the "Discoveries" in Watkins's poem by that title (Ballad of the Mari Lwyd and Other Poems 65-66): it is

> The Christian Paradox, bringing its great reward
> By loss; the moment known to Kierkegaard. (66)

Despite Watkins's apparent carelessness in technique in parts of some of the poems analyzed in this chapter, their theme is clearly that "moment" of faith in the "Paradox" of "the God-Man."

CHAPTER III: "THE MOMENT OF CONSCIENCE"

Commentators on Watkins have noted, especially in discussion of "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" (Ballad of the Mari Lwyd and Other Poems 69-87), his excessive concern with the eternal moment in time, but they have not traced it to its source in Kierkegaard. McCormick attributes the concern to Watkins's Christian mysticism and his Blakean affinity:

> Watkins's main theme is the durationless moment, paradoxically occurring in and out of time, yet good for all eternity, in which the divine imagination sees "the world in a grain of sand." This moment of transcendental awareness, of perceiving the essential unity of all things in one great mind is the matter of many of Watkins' poems. It must be understood as the given of all the rest. ("'I Sing'" 16)

Later in the dissertation she describes the moment as "the point at which time becomes no time, the eternal moment of the 'Mari Lwyd' and 'Taliesin and the Spring of Vision'" (232). The problem with this interpretation is that it fails to distinguish among the various moments that Watkins celebrates as eternal in his poems. Analysis of "Taliesin and the Spring of Vision" in the previous chapter has suggested that in that poem Watkins is concerned chiefly with "the moment of faith" and with explaining, in a myth created by Watkins, the source of Taliesin's inspiration as the movement

from paganism to Christianity. The moment is one of "transcendental awareness" only insofar as it contains consciousness of the difference between a transcendental God and fallen man. Acceptance of that difference and of its mediation by Christ is the burden of the poem. The moment is eternal in the sense that Taliesin dies to the "natural man" and is reborn in Christian humility. The moment in "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" is slightly different in nature. Like the moment of faith in the poems examined earlier, it is a paradoxical moment: "a kind of reconciliation of contraries, an eternal moment of contradictions," as Watkins put it in "New Year 1965" (22). It is also a moment of resurrection, insofar as both the Mari Lwyd and her carriers are raised from death, and of rebirth, insomuch as the Mari Lwyd undergoes a transformation from pagan rite to Christian ritual in the course of the poem. The central concern of the ballad, however, is the Living to whom the Mari and the Dead return in a manner and a form designed to test them as individuals: that is, to test their faith by testing their Christian charity. Whereas "Taliesin and the Spring of Vision" is designed to teach what Watkins considered to be the essence of Christianity through the example of one who freely chose Christianity knowing the choice means "loss," "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" is intended to provoke an examination of conscience through an "indirect" attack or an "approach from behind," as Kierkegaard described his method in the

early pseudonymous works (The Point of View 24). The attack is by individuals who do not claim to be Christians upon people who do but who have clearly never experienced "the moment of faith."

Oddly enough, of the commentators, it is Polk, who dismisses or chooses to ignore its specifically Christian elements, who comes closest to description of the moment in the ballad, when she speculates that it is "the still point of the turning world behind the 'now' which is ever-moving ... wherein all time is wrapped up in a ball" and when she connects it with St. Paul's description of the Last Judgment (58). In "New Year 1965" Watkins describes New Year's Eve as the completion of "a ring of time" and as similar to the end of time in that "all is expectation and the movement of time to its climax, the movement of the refrain of my ballad" (22). Although it is not exactly the Last Judgment, the moment enacted in the ballad has a significance comparable with it for it is an eternal moment in which the Living meet the Dead and are judged. The Living are tried both by the objective "(Voice)" commenting on each round of the rhyming contest between the two groups and by the audience which is invited to act as judge when in the Prologue the Announcer (who also appears to be the "Voice") describes the midnight hour of the ballad as "the moment of conscience" (69).

Again it is in Kierkegaard's work that one finds material which particularly assists understanding of Watkins's conception

and presentation of this moment. Kierkegaard suggests the connection between "the moment of conscience" and the Last Judgment in the discourse Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing: Spiritual Preparation for the Office of Confession, a talk meant to be used as an examination of conscience: "For, after all, what is eternity's accounting other than that the voice of conscience is forever installed with its eternal right to be the exclusive voice?" (186) Perhaps it is no coincidence that the moral point of view in the ballad is a disembodied "(Voice)" not associated with either side in the contest. Since, according to Kierkegaard, it is "the voice of conscience" that leads to remorse and repentance, his description of the "eleventh hour" of remorse provides an illuminating gloss on some of the details of the moment in the ballad:

> Oh, eleventh hour, whenever thou art present, how all is changed! How still everything is, as if it were the midnight hour; how sober, as if it were the hour of death; how lonely, as if it were among the tombs; how solemn, as if it were within eternity. (42)

The moment in the poem is just such. Stillness and silence characterize the universe surrounding the scene after the initial tumultuous return of the Dead at the midnight hour. During the rounds in the rhyming contest "the clock is stopped" and "dumb," and at the end of the first two rounds the Living note the return of the temporal in the lines:

> Hark, they are going; the footsteps shrink,
> And the sea renews her cry.
> The big stars stare and the small stars wink;
> The Plough goes glittering by. (76)

The metaphor of the eleventh hour may be used for any purpose, of course, but it becomes clear from a close analysis of the ballad that it is a time when the Living are forced to hear "the voice of conscience" which condemns them by revealing their selfishness and their hypocrisy.

Before proceeding to analysis of the ballad proper, it will be helpful to consider other information provided by the Announcer in the Prologue. He explains that "the Dead return" and attempt to enter the house in which the Living are gathered:

> They strain towards the fire which fosters and warms the Living.
> The Living, who have cast them out, from their own fear, from their own fear of themselves, into the outer loneliness of death, rejected them, and cast them out forever:
> The Living cringe and warm themselves by the fire, shrinking from that loneliness, that singleness of heart. (69)

The Living's "fear of themselves" and of "that singleness of heart," the consciousness of which is forced upon them by the Dead, suggests that the Dead represent some part of the Living that they have rejected and warns that the ballad will be much more than the re-enactment of the ancient Welsh custom of the Mari Lwyd. According to the custom the Mari was "carried from house to house on the last night of the

year" by "a party of singers, wits and impromptu poets, who, on the pretext of blessing, boasting of the sanctity of what they carried [the Mari Lwyd translates 'Grey Mare' and is an exhumed horse's skull], tried to gain entrance to a house for the sake of obtaining food and drink." They received the refreshments if they could defeat the inmates in "a rhyming contest" to which they challenged them (V. Watkins, "Note on the Mari Lwyd," Ballad of the Mari Lwyd 89). "Singleness of heart" is another form of Kierkegaard's expression "To Will One Thing" as a definition of "Purity of Heart: based on the words of James in his Epistle, chapter 4, verse 8: '... purify your hearts ye double-minded'" (Purity of Heart 53); and, like Kierkegaard, Watkins equates it with the loneliness of being an individual before God, the loneliness of conscience which, according to Kierkegaard, one cannot escape if one speaks to oneself as if before a dead person -- "before a transfigured one" -- who is clearly cut off from the distractions and excuses of the temporal (91-2). If the return of the Dead in the ballad is seen in this light, the poem becomes intelligible on one level as a dramatization of "the moment of conscience" for the Living who are guilty of "double-mindedness" in the Kierkegaardian sense that they do not function as individuals in "inwardness."

In light of these allusions to "the individual," "the conscience" and "purity of heart," the Living in the ballad are in a desperate condition. In contrast to the Dead, the

Announcer says, "The Living are defended by the rich warmth of the flames which keeps that loneliness out" (69). It is their sense of community and this apparently secure temporal existence with which they arm themselves against "the moment of conscience," and for them the significance of the moment is never realized since they remain in the same condition throughout the ballad: "terrified" but scornful.

Although the poem is a ballad in form, it is nearer in structure to Greek tragedy. The Prologue is followed by the ballad proper which falls into five sections that are similar to the five parts of the tragedy following its Prologue. The opening section of the ballad proper is an exposition of the situation given, apparently, by the Announcer since there is no speaker identified at its beginning. Afterwards, one assumes, it is this speaker who is identified as "(Voice)" to distinguish him from the Living who are referred to as "Figures" and from the Dead who are identified by the inverted commas which set off their parts in the rhyming contest and by the directions "(Very faint)" and "(Loud and near)" indicating their approach in three of the last four sections. The opening section is followed by three episodes consisting of three rounds in the contest, each of which is followed by commentary by the "(Voice)" which serves much the same function as the choral odes punctuating the episodes in Greek tragedy: as mentioned earlier, this speaker provides the one objective voice in the ballad; he describes and

interprets the actions of the others and points the moral near the end. The last section, comparable with the tragedy's exodus, consists of only two stanzas which suggest that the Dead are approaching the house once more.

The importance of the hour and the sense of urgency which informs the whole poem is introduced in the first two lines of the first section which also make up the main refrain of the ballad: "Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. Midnight. / Hark at the hands of the clock" (70). This stanza continues with description of the boisterous, almost savage, return of the dead whose "fists on the coffins knock" when they "tear through the frost of the ground / As heretic, drunkard and thief." The dominant atmosphere of uncertainty is relieved only by the slightly (and deliberately ?) humorous effect of the line "Then they were steady and stiff" to describe the unexpectedness of the Dead's return and the unpreparedness of the Living for such a show of supernatural force.

In the second stanza the unidentified speaker suggests that there is no need for the Living to fear chaos in this return for, ironically, what appears confusion is, in fact, order. The Dead return by design of Love: "The terrible, picklock Charities / Raised the erected dead" (70) Again Kierkegaardian comparison is probably the source of the metaphor Watkins is using. This time it is found in Works of Love. In the first of three discourses on the second

commandment, Kierkegaard compares the phrase "as thyself" to a picklock:

> ... [I]t is its [Christianity's] intention to strip us of our selfishness. This selfishness consists in loving one's self; but if one must love his neighbor as himself, then the commandment opens the lock of self-love as with a picklock, and the man with it. (1: 15)

This metaphor of the picklock introduces the first test of the Living in the ballad, a test of their Christian love which does not allow for any exception to the category of the neighbour, which must then include the Dead even if they seem "heretic, drunkard and thief." According to the Announcer, they are also "the banished poor" and "Locked-out lepers with haloes come" (71), this last suggesting that they have been saved by Christ and transformed by their deaths, an idea that is reinforced by another refrain in the ballad: "Sinner and saint, sinner and saint...." Given the Kierkegaardian allusions noted already, it is not really far-fetched to assume that Watkins is influenced by Kierkegaard's reflection in his journal: "God creates out of nothing, wonderful you say: yes, to be sure, but he does what is still more wonderful: he makes saints out of sinners" (The Journals, Item 209). Of course, Kierkegaard is referring to Christ's self-sacrifice to save man. Watkins is clearly thinking of the same when he uses the occasional refrain alluding to the Last Supper: "Chalice and Wafer. Wine and Bread. / And the picklock,

picklock, picklock tread" (70). One of the Living in a subtle bit of dramatic irony condemns himself and his fellows when in the first episode he ends a description of their feast with the variation: "Chalice and wafer that blessed the dead, / And the picklock, picklock, picklock tread" (73).

When one analyzes the behaviour and attitude of the Living in this first episode of the ballad it is clear that their conception of love is "pre-Christian," although they are apparently Christians. Implicit in Kierkegaard's simile of the "picklock" is the comparison of self-love to a locked house. In the ballad, the "picklock Charities" have guided the Dead and their Mari to just such a "bolted house." The first words spoken by the Living are telling in this respect:

> Fasten the yard-gate, bolt the door,
> And let the great fat drip.
> The roar that we love is the frying pan's roar
> On the flames, like a floating ship.
> The Old Nick will keep the flies from our sheep,
> The tick, the flea and the louse.
> Open the flagons. Uncork the deep
> Beer of this bolted house. (72)

Soon after, one of the Living provides more details about the nature of this feast that they are preparing to enjoy:

> Crammed with food the table creaks.
> The dogs grow fat on the crumbs.
> God bless our board that springs no leaks,
> And here no ruffian comes,
> No beggars itching with jackdaws' eyes
> No fox on the trail of food,
> No man with the plague from Hangman's Rise
> No jay from Dead Man's Wood. (73)

Ironically, while the locked gate and door represent their selfishness, the Living think of their feast as a Christian communion. It is at the end of the second stanza quoted here that the variation on the refrain alluding to the Eucharist comes. The first two lines of the stanza capture their excessive greed, and the repetition of the negative at the beginning of each of the last four lines prepares for their refusal to give to the "Starving" Dead of what they have in abundance.

To the Dead's first request for food the Living respond with scorn and the excuse that the Mari Lwyd is not of their kind: "White horses need white horses' food" (75). Their refusal to admit their fellowship with the Mari and the Dead is punctuated throughout this section by the refrain "Sinner and saint, sinner and saint" which alludes to the brotherhood of all men in God's love. This section of the ballad ends with analysis by the Voice, and the kinship of the Living and the Dead is its substance:

> Quietness stretches the pendulum's chain
> To the limit where terrors start,
> Where the dead and the living find again
> They beat with the selfsame heart.
>
> In the coffin-glass and the window-pane
> You beat with the selfsame heart. (77)

What is the purpose of this emphasis on the kinship of the Living and the Dead, and what part does it play in the test set up by the "picklock Charities"? According to Kierkegaard,

the relationship is undeniable, and one's behaviour in it is the ultimate "test of what love really is":

> If your head swims from constantly looking at and hearing about the diversities of life, then go out to the dead; there you have power over the differences: between the "kinships of clay" there are no diversities, but only the close kinships. For the fact that all men are blood-relations, hence of one blood, this kinship is frequently denied in life; but that they are of one clay, this kinship of death, no one can deny ..... How then could I, in writing about love, let the opportunity pass to make a test of what love really is? Truly, if you wish to ascertain what love is in yourself or another man, then must you notice how he behaves with respect to the dead. (Works of Love 2:278-9)

The Living in the ballad reveal their self-love not only in their refusal to acknowledge the resurrected Dead as their neighbour in the form of "A beggar" who "knock[s] on the door," then, but also in their disregard for the duty they owed to these dead whom, according to the Announcer, they "nailed down" beneath "the neglected door" (71).

Before leaving this first section one should note that the Dead, besides asking for "pity," claim that they have passed up "a great meal..../ ... by the fire of the inn / sheltered from the frost" in order to bring their Mari Lwyd to the Living gathered in this house so that she might "inspire [their] feast" (73-74). On its own that claim might be nothing more than the "boasting" (Watkins's word in the note) of the carriers who, even though they are "the Dead,"

attempt, like the Mari Lwyd carriers of custom, to gain access to the fire, the food and the drink, urging each other

> 'Press, we are one step nearer
> The live coals in the grate (81),

and pleading with the Living

> 'O a ham-bone high on a ceiling-hook
> And a goose with a golden skin,
> And the roaring flames of the food you cook:
> For God's sake let us in!' (86)

Their claim cannot be dismissed so easily, however, since it is reinforced by the Announcer's claim for the Mari's inspirational powers:

> The breath of a numb thing, loud and faint:
> Something found and lost.
> The minute drops in the minute-glass;
> Conscience counts the cost.
> What mounted murderous thing goes past
> The room of Pentecost?
> Sinner and saint, sinner and saint:
> A Horse's head in the frost. (71)

Although the Yeatsean question sounds as if it might be a condemnation of the Mari, it clearly is not since "Conscience counts the cost" of allowing the moment to pass without admitting this "breath of a numb thing." Watkins's comments on the difference between poetry and philosophy and the similarity between poetry and theology act as a gloss on this stanza:

> "There is a place at the bottom of
> graves where contraries are equally

> true." That saying of William Blake expresses, perhaps, better than any other, the distinction between poetry and philosophy. Contrary statements in poetry can both be true.... Poetry is really closer to theology. The Book of Job is full of theology, and it is full of contradictions, the clash of imagination with greater imagination, the journey of integrity through the dark night of the soul, the equating of arrogance and humility, the reconciliation of opposites through the unknown dimensions of forgiveness and love. This is poetry. ("For a Reading of Poems at Greg-y-nog" 233-4)

The "unknown dimensions of forgiveness and love" make this "mounted murderous thing go[ing] past / The room of Pentecost" compatible with the Holy Spirit within the room, and this "reconciliation of opposites" in the Mari ("Sinner and saint") reinforces the Dead's claim that she is a gift of inspiration, a gift of Charity with which early Christian writers identified the Holy Spirit (OED).

Like some who heard the Apostles speak following the descent of the Holy spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2: 12-13), the Living are confused by the Dead's claims for the Mari and accuse them of drunkenness. In episode two they jeeringly refer to the Mari as "Froth from an old barrel" (78); in episode three they appear to recognize, but are unwilling to accept, that "Holy Charity's bastard songs / Burst from a seawave's fall" (83); and in this same episode they take comfort in the rational explanation that the Dead are drunken liars:

> Snatch off that mask from a drinker's mouth
> All lit by phosphorus up.
> Men of the night, I know your drouth;
> Your mouth would blister the cup.
> When the big stars stare and the small stars wink
> You cry it's the break of day.
> Out of our sight; you are blind with drink:
> Ride your Mari away. (84)

However, unlike the three thousand who were converted after Peter's explanation that the risen Christ was responsible for the experience of Pentecost and his promise that those who accept Christ "will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2: 38), the Living in the ballad will not hear.

Once the Living's rejection of the Dead and their Mari is understood as failure to pass the test of the "picklock Charities," it is easier to understand it as a revelation of their lack of Christian faith since, as mentioned earlier, Watkins agreed with Kierkegaard who agreed with Luther that "faith shall be known by love." Episode two of the rhyming contest is devoted to this test:

> 'Under the womb of teeming night
> Our Mari tries your faith;
> And She has Charity's crown of light
> Spectre she knows and wraith....' (80)

In this section the Dead equate the Mari with charity and charity with Christ's sacrificial love: they curse the Living "'That will not give ... / The treasure found in the sack'" and warn them that "'In the black of the sack, in the night of death / Shines what [they] dare not lose.'" They accuse the Living of placing their "'faith in the pin of the

tongs,'" that is, in the comforts of the fire around which the Living gather not realizing the mystery of the fire -- that it burns and gives life by destroying other life, and so forms part of the mystery of the eternal:

> 'But the pin goes in to the inmost dark
> Where the dead and living meet,
> And the clock is stopped by the shock of the spark
> Or the stealthy patter of feet.
> Where disdain has cast to the utmost pitch
> The strands of the finished thread,
> The clock goes out and the ashes twitch
> Roused by the breaking of bread.' (80-81)

The last four lines of the stanza suggest that the destruction-creation symbolism of the fire is a metaphor for eternal life beginning in death: it is as if eternal life is a fire ignited from the body's "ashes" by Christ's offering.

Nowhere in the ballad do the Dead claim to be Christians themselves, but they appeal to the Living as Christians to admit the Mari who by this episode seems to have become a symbol of the paradoxical nature of Christian faith:

> 'Great light you shall gather,
> For Mari here is holy;
> She saw dark thorns harrow
> Your God crowned with the holly.' (78)

Here, and in the last episode, the Dead suggest that the Living are hypocrites. They profess to be Christians, but they do not possess the "inwardness" necessary for real Christian faith in the Kierkegaardian sense of accepting "The Paradox" which offers "offense" to the reason. The

Living need "'blessing to heal [their] sight,'" and this is what the Dead claim they offer in the form of the Mari Lwyd. They offer the Living another way of seeing, another standpoint from which to view the natural world. Their return and the return of the Mari is proof, deliberately paradoxical, of the eternal in nature, of life won through death and of the resurrection of the body.

The Living refuse even to listen; they compare the effect of the Dead's warnings and promises to the transience and indirection of "snowflakes":

> They fasten, then fade slowly,
> Hither and thither blowing:
> Your words are falling still. (78)

Instead of accepting the gift they are offered, they ask:

> If we lift and slide the bolt of the door
> What can our warm beer buy?
> What can you give for the food we store
> But a slice of starving sky? (81)

Presumably at this point the Living do not so much fear the Dead and the Mari as hold them in contempt as beggars. Their asking what they will get in return indicates that they give no thought to Christian charity at the same time that it reflects their insensitivity to forces outside time and space. Sharing the perspective of the Voice, however, the audience knows that the Living are wrong in their judgment. The episode ends like the first with a comment on the contest by the disembodied Voice who says the Mari Lwyd is a "sacred

thing" and compares it to Lazarus in its symbolic role as a resurrected body:

> Lazarus comes in a shroud so white
> Out of the hands of the clock. (82)

The allusion serves as well to associate the Mari and the Dead with faith in Christ and to "unmask" the Living as unbelievers.

The irony of the last episode of the rhyming contest is pointed. The Living see the Dead as a threat to their feast and part of a diabolical plot to rob, mutilate and even murder them:

> We face the terrible masquerade
> Of robbers dressed like the dead.
> .....
> Under their blessing they blast and blind,
> Maim, ravish and kill. (82-3)

The first twist is that the "masquerade" the Living face is the opposite of the one they say they fear: in fact, they face the Dead dressed like robbers and ruffians. The second twist is that while the Dead do come in questionable shape begging food and drink, they come really to bless, and it is their "blessing" that is the real threat to the Living's selfishness and hypocrisy. The lies are actually "holy deceptions" (Watkins's Note 90) designed to test the Living by providing an examination of conscience which they try to avoid. The first two episodes form part of the examination in that they dramatize the Living's failure to live up to

their Christian faith. The third episode explains their failure as a lack of humility. They refuse to admit their part in the "marrow of sin" of which the Dead speak in once again claiming kinship with the Living (79). At this point the full significance of the Dead returning as drunkards and thieves becomes clear. The Dead admit their own need of forgiveness, and they try to get the Living to recognize that they, too, are part of a common fallen humanity which has been redeemed by Christ:

> 'Surely, surely you'll open the door
> Now that you know our sins;
> For all grows good that was foul before
> Where the spark of heaven begins.
> ......
> Know that you are one with Cain the farm
> And Dai of Dowlais pit.... (85)

The Living, on the other hand, attempt to maintain a distance between themselves, the "clean souls," and the Dead who confess their "'evil.'" Not only do they austerely refuse to forgive, but also they self-righteously deny their own need for forgiveness, and in this way, too, they deny their God who made forgiveness possible and deemed it a virtue.

This last round in the contest ends with a summary comment by the Voice describing the nature of the experience: "Striking the clock when the hands are straight / You have seen a god in the eyes of a beggar" (87). The comment unites the various concerns in the ballad and serves as a judgment of the contest. The Living have failed to pass any

part of the test set up by "Holy Charity," and their "virtue is unmasked" as the Announcer warned in the Prologue. Given the Kierkegaardian allusions throughout the ballad, one is not surprised to find an allusion in these two lines to Kierkegaard's description of "the equality of eternity" contained in the second commandment:

> ...[I]f one is truly to love his neighbor, he must remember every moment that the difference between them is only a disguise. For ... Christianity has not wished to storm forth to abolish the differences...; but it wants the difference to hang loosely about the individual...; loosely like the ragged cloak in which a supernatural being has concealed itself. When the difference hangs thus loosely, then the essential other is glimpsed in every individual, that common to all, that eternal resemblance, the equality. If it were this way, if every individual lived in this way, then would the temporal existence have attained its highest point ... [as] the reflection of eternity.... You would indeed see the beggar..., but you would see in him the inner glory, the equality of glory, whi h his shabby coat conceals. (Works of Love 1: 67; 72-3; emphasis added in the blocked quotation)

The Living in the ballad see only the "beggar": that is, they fail to understand the nature of the eternal in the resurrected Mari, in the Dead and in themselves.

Consequently, in their rejection of kinship with the Dead, the Living cut themselves off from eternity, and ironically (considering their fear of chaos in this moment) they subject themselves to the chaos of the temporal. The

ballad, like the questioning in Kierkegaard's Purity of Heart, is an "accusation" (Purity of Heart 211) which may be summed up by the question Kierkegaard poses near the end of this discourse:

> And what is your attitude toward others? Are you at one with all by willing only one thing?... Do you do unto others what you will that they should do unto you? For this will is the eternal order that governs all things, that brings you into union with the dead, and with the men whom you never see ... with all men upon the whole earth, who are related to each other by blood and eternally related to the Divine by eternity's task of willing only one thing. (205-6)

These are the questions raised in "the moment of conscience" offered to the Living of the ballad, and if each of the Living were to accept this moment, he must answer that he does not have "the consciousness before God of one's eternal responsibility to be an individual [which] is the one thing necessary" for "purity of heart" and eternal happiness according to Kierkegaard (197-8). Instead, the Living try to avoid the responsibility: with "'locked hands,'" they "'crouch and cringe by the bounding flame'" (85) of the fire which "'warms many hands,'" seemingly unaware that they need to move to where "'A single point of light / can bring great loneliness'" (79). The contrast between the "'many hands'" and the "'single point of light'" reminds one of the Kierkegaardian distinction between the "crowd" as "untruth" and the "individual" as "truth" ("'The Individual': Two

'Notes' Concerning my Work as an Author," The Point of View 114).

Polk, McCormick and Mathias all seem to agree that the Living of the ballad lack some vital quality (for McCormick and Mathias, it is imagination or the poetic spirit; for Polk, these and a sense of the living past), yet all three suggest that the Living have driven the Dead away from the door at the end, which, given the rules of the rhyming contest outlined by Watkins, would mean that the Living have won the contest despite their lack of a quality Watkins believed poets must possess. Perhaps their interpretation of the end of this ballad is based on Watkins's "Introduction to 'The Ballad of the Outer Dark'" in which he says he conceived the Prologue to this "new Ballad" while he was assisting in the 1948 Swansea production of "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" (The Ballad of the Outer Dark and Other Poems 51). The note may suggest that the second ballad is meant as a sequel to the first:

> The party of impromptu rhymers carrying the skull has already been driven away when 'The Ballad of the Outer Dark' begins. Midnight has already struck, and the firelit room is bolted again. All is security and peace. But all is not quite still. The circumscribed firelit room is there with its familiar objects; and the clock keeps living time. The enemy, the unknown, the force of violence and upheaval, has been expelled into the Outer Dark. But there is still the fear that it may return and take possession. Judgment hangs in the

> balance, just after midnight, between
> the Old Year and the New. (51)

If the second ballad is meant to be a resumption of the first, Watkins must be using the note to describe what has happened in an interval between the two or to explain that the whole of the second poem is a revised version of the ending of the first beginning after the comment on the third round by the Voice. It is more likely he means that the "new Ballad" has as its central concern the moment following one similar to, but not the same as, the one in "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" since there is little in this first to suggest that the Dead have been driven away.

Had "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" ended with the Voice's last comment, one might infer that the Dead have left, but the last ones heard are the Dead as they once again approach the house, their voices rising from "(Faint)" in their first stanza to "(Loud and Near)" in their second (87). Even if this were not the case, one would still be left with the question of who has been defeated since the Voice announces the symbolic, if not the actual, death of the Living (who are identified as "Figures" throughout):

> Eyes on the cloth. Eyes on the plate.
> Rigor Mortis straightens the figure. (87)

The suggestion that the Living are now dead is reinforced by what the Dead say in their last stanza in a summation similar to the exodus of Greek tragedy:

'None can look out and bear that sight,
None can bear that shock.
The Mari's shadow is too bright,
Her brilliance is too black.
None can bear that terror
When the pendulum swings back
Of the stiff and stuffed and stifled thing
Gleaming in the sack.'

In the context of the poem the death of the Living is their hour of Judgment, and so the moment of the poem may be the moment of the Last Judgment after all, given that the Living are described in the directions at the beginning as "stylistic figures whose movements exaggerate human movements" (70), which suggests that they are to be taken symbolically as representatives of all the Living.

Watkins's description of the Mari Lwyd and her carriers as "the enemy, the unknown, the force of violence and upheaval" in the note to the second ballad may require some explanation. It must not be read as a condemnation of the Mari and the Dead by the poet. It may be a reflection of the warped point of view of the Living (from the poet's point of view, of course), but it is more likely another statement of the metaphor of the inner "revolution" that Watkins and Kierkegaard believed Christianity is and that Watkins considered the impetus of poetry.

Detailed analysis of "The Ballad of the Outer Dark" (Ballad of the Outer Dark and Other Poems 51-76) more properly belongs in the discussion of Watkins's view of the poet and

poetry to follow, but it may be noted here that the moment dramatized in it is more obviously related to the moment of the Last Judgment than the one enacted in "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd." In the opening, the narrator warns the Living that "the bony Judge ... / Returns to be [their] Assessor, in the twinkling of an eye," the First Figure asks of the Mari,

> And who are these who bring
> The Day of Judgment to a jaw
> Worked by a wagging string? (59)

and the "Second Voice" (representing the Dead in this ballad) says, just before the Living are banished to the Outer Dark and the Dead become the Living inside the house, "To try your souls we came, / The balance being in doubt."

In this "Judgment" the Living's refusal to forgive is the central issue. At the beginning of the ballad one of the Living voices fear of retribution from spirits determined "To trample this house to ruin, where forgiveness was denied." The issue is raised again by one of the Dead who explains their return as desire to redress the wrongs in their lives and to teach the Living the "truth" that they have learned in death:

> Dead we remembered in the grave
> The mite we had not given;
> That pitched us forward like a wave
> To give, and be forgiven. (66)

The Dead have learned that Christian charity and humility form "the right preparation for death" (as Watkins said of the "mite" in the note on "Egyptian Burial: Resurrection in Wales" ["First Choice," 59]). By the end, the question of the Living's guilt no longer hangs in the balance. The Dead judge:

> The firelight of your living
> Has fallen through the grate.
> There can be no forgiving
> For them who give too late. (75)

Yet this judgment is not as severe as it seems since as carriers of the Mari, presumably these Dead, like the first carriers, will learn humility and seek forgiveness.

In this ballad, too, the Mari Lwyd's power is associated with the Christian belief that the grave leads to the resurrection of the immortal body. The Dead promise to teach the Living to live in joyous anticipation of death if they will admit the Mari:

> ... [W]e'll teach you how to eat
> The marrow of each day
> And taste the substance of its meat
> Though all be torn away. (61)

Like the Living in "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd," these Living refuse to believe in the resurrection of the body and scornfully ask,

> Do you indeed declare
> That flesh and blood are properties
> Less true than bone and air? (61)

Watkins may be alluding here to Jewish tradition in which "a piece of very hard bone ... is symbolic of ... belief in resurrection" (Cirlot 31). The Mari is such a bone, a skull used year after year in the ceremony, but the Living see it only as a sign of death which they stubbornly maintain is not the essence of life or vitality: "... gladness of heart / Depends for its life on the pleasures where death has no part," one of the Living glibly says (66). In Watkins, that attitude reflects despair or the "lack of the eternal."

Ultimately for Watkins, as for Kierkegaard, all eternal moments depend on "the Moment" when the contradictions of the eternal and the temporal were united, when the historical received the eternal through God's coming into being in it (Kierkegaard Philosophical Fragments 77).

CHAPTER IV: THE "LIBERATING GOD"

The conclusions reached in the two preceding chapters must be qualified if one is to get to the heart of Watkins's "belief." They apply to man as man rather than to man as poet. Watkins alludes to the distinction in "A Note on 'Earth-Dress'" presented to McCormick after she wrote a paper on the significance of birds in his poetry:

> Man, insofar as he is soul, is indestructible; but he cannot, while he is in the flesh, endure the lightning of poetic genius itself. He cannot confront eternity; to him, while he is living in time, it is a terror; so he seeks the shelter of man-made thoughts, habitual words, a condition where the lightning is tempered and only reflections of eternity are seen.... The will of Prometheus, which is also man's will, is right in defying the elements, but insofar as it defies the lightning itself, it represents a warning to man. The lightning, poetic genius in one of its manifestations, godhead itself in another, is inaccessible to man except through a mediator. (236)

The comments contain Watkins's usual assumption of a break in man's relationship to the Truth (here called "the lightning"). What is interesting is the equating of "poetic genius" and "godhead" as revelations of it. For Watkins, poetry and Christianity originate in the same source and are not merely

analogous; they are synonymous: both reveal the Word, and the poet, like Christ, is the Word made flesh.

In "Poets on Poetry" Watkins wrote that "Lyrical poetry, at its best, is the physical body of what the imagination recognizes as truth" (104), and the theory is repeated again and again in his poetry. In "Art and the Ravens," "art" is defined as "the body of love" (The Death Bell 58), and in "Demands of the Muse," for example, the perfect poem is equal to the Incarnation, "the moment without age" (Affinities 21). In this last poem Watkins goes so far as to say that "Art is the principle of all creation / And there the desert is, where art is not" (20). Poetry, then, is an embodiment of the Word, and the poet's role is to make perception of the eternal accessible to man in time.

In fulfilling this role, the poet must be a special being. In "Demands of the Muse" he may appear at first to be no more than an instrument, however exalted ("my chosen and my tool in time"), but by the third stanza his birth, like the poem's creation, is related to the Immaculate Conception:

> Born into time of love's perceptions, he
> In not of time. The acts of time to him
> Are marginal. From the first hour he knows me
> Until the last, he shall divine my words.
> In his own solitude he hears another. (21)

McCormick finds this stanza "shocking" and paraphrases it: "the birth of a poet is the special province of divine love.

His birth requires an act of grace, as do the initial steps of the Via Mystica" ("'I Sing'" 131). One assumes that she would find it even more shocking as a declaration that the poet is another embodiment of the Word, which is what it seems. The poet is not merely a mystic; he is a "mediator" in the aesthetic sense comparable with Christ in the Christian, and both belong to the religious sphere: both are "manifestations" of the Eternal in time. The poet is, in Watkins's phrase, "a liberating god" (qtd. in McCormick, "'I Sing,'" footnote 2, 97).

Clearly, this is not to say that Watkins is espousing a pure "religion of art." Certainly, he would not have agreed with that assessment of his vision. In explaining to Michael Hamburger why the attitude of the New Statesman and of Cyril Connolly to poetry seemed false to him, Watkins argued:

> The weakness of that attitude is that aesthetic ideas are applied to metaphysical truth whereas in true poetry, metaphysical truth transfigures the aesthetic ideas. (qtd. in Hamburger 50)

Therein is the fine distinction in Watkins's concept of the unity of art and Christianity: poetry becomes "true poetry" when it is changed in form by "metaphysical truth." The poet who is a "mediator" must be a Christian in the Kierkegaardian sense of having accepted "inwardness or subjectivity" as that "truth." It is this religion of faith

that Watkins embraces, and he believed it is to be found in both poetry and theology.

It may be this unity of poetry and Christianity in his imagination that explains why critics such as Raine and Mathias are frustrated in their attempts to account for the seemingly contradictory claims of the two in his poetry and why they back away from attempting to illustrate the theory that there is a development in his poetry from paganism to Christianity (Mathias, Vernon Watkins 52). As Mathias concludes, the two co-exist in his poetry from the beginning. What unites the two elements of his belief is, I think, the presence of paradox. In his poetry Watkins is "concerned chiefly with paradoxical truths" ("Replies to Wales Questionnaire" 17), and for him, "A poet is not a reporter, unless he is a reporter of eternal truths" ("New year 1965," 23). He equates the "eternal" and the "paradoxical," and to that extent, his view of the eternal is similar to Kierkegaard's: "Christianity's ['idea'] is the paradox" (Kierkegaard, The Journals, Item 356), and "Christianity ... is precisely the poetry of eternity" (Kierkegaard, qtd. in Lowrie 211). It departs from Kierkegaard's, however, in its inclusion of the poet as a mediator between God and man and of poetry as equal to Christianity in the religious sphere. Used by Kierkegaard, the phrase "the poetry of eternity" is a metaphoric description of Christianity; applied to Watkins, it is a literal description of the kind of poetry he sought to write.

A closer look at the central figure of the Mari in "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" and "The Ballad of the Outer Dark" shows that blend of Christianity and poetry in his imagination. As noted earlier, the Mari Lwyd in the first ballad is associated with Christ in a number of ways: in the refrain alluding to the Last Supper, in the allusion to Pentecost, in the claim that the Mari is "a god" in the form of "a beggar," and in implicit comparisons of the return of the Mari to the Second Coming. As noted, also, in the second ballad these comparisons are more explicit. An additional comparison of the Mari to Christ in the second ballad alludes to Kierkegaard's question in Philosophical Fragments of whether Christianity as an historical point of departure can be consistent with Eternal Truth. The Second Figure demands of the carriers:

> Tell what your Mari is. Explain
> Why the confusion of this hour
> Makes the historical put on power. (64)

Like Christ, Watkins claims, the Mari is an "historical" figure who is eternal: she is a god who enters time.

The Mari, however, is also poetry: in the first ballad, she is "Our wit" (74; 75) and "has those secrets/known to the minstrel solely" (78); in the second, she is referred to by her carriers as "the life of verse" (66), "Queen of wits / And mother of rhymes" (70) whose "light" is "Truth ... the

great unmasker" (71). In rejecting her in this role, the Living know that they are rejecting a revelation of the Truth:

> ... have you not learnt from the lightning
> to go
> Where verses are honoured? There's none here to
> pull at your bridle. (66)

The Mari is "the lightning's ghost" as the carriers claim (71), a fusion of "poetic genius" and "godhead" in one figure; and it is a measure of Watkins's technical skill that in "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" this fusion is achieved technically by the blending of the poem's external ballad form and its internal tragic structure and by the combination of incantation and declamation appropriate for these in its language.

The same fusion of poet and Christ in a poetic Christian eternity is found in Watkins's attitude towards members of his "nation" of poets and in poems he wrote in memory of them. In fact, both Gwen Watkins and Mathias speculate that "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" is based in part on Watkins's need to explain his admiration for Dylan Thomas -- an enigma given that Watkins was "highly critical of anyone who did not measure up to his exacting standards" and Thomas "cared nothing" about the friendship (G. Watkins, Portrait 4). Mathias believes

> He attempted to solve this problem ... in Ballad of the Mari Lwyd, where the voices of the Dead were associated in his mind with Dylan Thomas and the truth that is born of the wondering paganism,

> the immaculate myth-making of man.
> (Vernon Watkins 42)

Gwen Watkins argues that the problem was more personal: a need to confront a divided self as much as a split Thomas. Of "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" she writes:

> There are many possible interpretations .... But it is certain that it is in some respects an attempt by Vernon to come to terms with the dichotomy of Dylan's nature, his "drunken claims and holy deceptions." (Portrait 85)

For Watkins, she claims,

> Dylan was a kind of alter ego, a poet who had taken the chance that he had baulked at.... The unacknowledged, unadmitted, almost certainly unrealised bond between them was that both had chosen "perfection of the work" rather than of life. (21)

Indeed, she concludes:

> It was the same man underneath -- or rather the same immature, confused, unresolved being, who had turned from life, which he could not control, to words, which he could. (215)

Certainly, it is the manipulation of words, the creative function, that Watkins praises in his own "portrait[s]" of Thomas. Early in the relationship he wrote "Portrait of a Friend" (from which Gwen Watkins has taken the title of her book about the relationship, a straight title when applied to Watkins and a bitterly ironic one when applied to Thomas).

Watkins wrote the poem in response to a photograph of Thomas that Thomas had sent him (G. Watkins, Portrait 56). It had become "crumpled in the post," as Watkins notes in the poem (Ballad of the Mari Lwyd 36); had it, or the relationship, meant less to him, he might have allowed the humour of the piece -- "The face of this cracked prophet" -- to dominate. As it is, he transformed his disappointment in the photograph into a statement of contradiction, or paradox rather. The creased picture became an image of the "cracked prophet" (with perhaps a pun on crazy) who is capable of doing what Kierkegaard attributed to God and what Watkins, as already noted, claimed for the Mari Lwyd: that is, the heart of the poem may be paraphrased as "he makes saints out of sinners." Thomas is one

> Toiling, as with closed eyes,
> Love's language to remake,
> To draw from their dumb wall
> The saints to a worldly brothel
> That a sinner's tongue may toll
> And call the place Bethel.

The second poem occasioned by a photograph of Thomas, given to Watkins this time after Thomas's death by Rollie McKenna, is "The Present" (G. Watkins, Portrait 168). The title may refer to the gift; it may also, as Gwen Watkins says, describe "the confusion of times we feel when we look at a record of the past in the present which was then the future" (168); clearly it is also associated with the claim that the poet Thomas, the "he" recalled by the photograph,

could recreate the past so vividly as to replace the present ("bring the future to this room") by "his echoing words.... / Immediate in a timeless Past" (Affinities 72). It is the same claim Watkins makes for Thomas as poet in less obscure terms in "A True Picture Restored: Memories of Dylan Thomas":

> Praise God, although a time is gone
> That will not come again,
> . . . . .
> The man I mourn can make it live,
> Every fallen grain. (Affinities 29)

That is to say that Thomas in his role as poet made his small portion of time eternal, and that, Watkins believed, made him "Christ-like" (G. Watkins, Portrait 172).

Dead, Thomas took his place among such other saints or gods of Watkins's poetic Christian eternity as Blake, Hölderlin, Yeats and Kierkegaard. For Blake, Watkins made what is perhaps his most extravagant claim, opening a sonnet honouring him with the bald statement "Blake was immortal" ("Blake," The Lady with the Unicorn 88); for Hölderlin, his claim was only slightly less: in him, "Godlike, reborn of light's ethereal silence, / The Christian and the Greek were reconciled" ("To Hölderlin," Affinities 48). "Yeats in Dublin: In Memory of W.B. Yeats" is notable for the awe with which Watkins was "silent / Witnessing that thing" -- Yeats "who had made the dead lips sing" (The Lamp and the Veil 17), and, in the same volume as this last, "The Broken Sea" celebrates the Kierkegaardian "leap of faith" (41) and

claims that Kierkegaard is "One of the cherubim" capable of "Annihilating time / With an intellectual blade ..." (60).

In this last claim is an essential difference between his and Kierkegaard's thought. Kierkegaard knew himself to be a "genius" and he called himself a "poet," but for him these were humble categories, far different from "an Apostle [who] is what he is through having divine authority" (Of the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle 93). He did not claim such authority for himself, and, in fact, he took great pains to make readers of his "edifying discourses" aware of his humble position, as he points out in a footnote to the analysis of the difference (97). Watkins, on the other hand, would elevate Kierkegaard at least to the position of the "Apostle" who has received a call from God to proclaim the Truth. In "Lightning and the City" (Uncollected Poems 10), he claims Kierkegaard's direct access to "the lightning":

> Yet lightning showed to Kierkegaard the Dane
> God in each place, and each like Nazareth;
> And made all others mercilessly plain,
> Forms of despair, the sickness unto death.

The "city" in this, the last stanza of the poem is built on the particular Kierkegaardian attitude, the elevation of passion and the irrational over the reason and "logic" of "Plato's city" and "laws" mentioned earlier in the poem. To Kierkegaard Watkins attributes the "perfect answer" to Socrates' "question" (which, as noted earlier, Kierkegaard rendered "What is Truth?"): "Till faith, the eyes but

measure. Then they praise." The attitude -- faith -- becomes "the perfect answer": that is, attitude and object become one.

One of Watkins's most extreme comments on the role of a Christian poet as a redeemer is expressed in "Egyptian Burial: Resurrection in Wales," the second of the two "Pledges to Darkness" poems in The Death Bell: Poems and Ballads (21-22). The poem is one of those mythological accounts of a conversion having no basis in actuality or time. It begins in time, as Watkins's note on the poem in "First Choice" indicates, with a description of a ritual preparation of an ancient Egyptian queen for burial, but it ends in the mummy's embracing Christianity and being reborn in Wales (59), and it is our poet who brings about this crisis in time.

The beginning of the poem reveals the thought of the workmen whose trust "in the power of art" to protect their dead queen (Watkins's note) is portrayed in the first and second stanzas in the care they take in placing every item in the tomb and in embalming the body:

> Leave within reach of this dead hand
> A little food, new coins, a vessel carved with grace.
> . . . . . .
> No element in conflict must
> Darken their [the eyes'] discs with crime
> Or spoil those edges where a craftsman's trust
> Paints and prepares a rigid queen
> Through death and sleep to climb. (21)

The first two and the last three lines quoted beautifully reflect the workers' slow ritualistic movements, and this

rhythm together with the images of the "dead hand" reaching and the "rigid" body climbing conveys their trust more forcefully than the statement of it in the next stanza.

The third stanza begins in some ambiguity. One is not sure at first in whom "Memory returns. Unbounded longings press" (21). The pun "Unbounded" produces a slightly humorous effect (similar to that of "grave shadow" in "Cantata for the Waking of Lazarus" and "vultures black beyond redemption" in "Christ and Charon") that seems out of place, and it is partly that which creates the confusion. One wonders if it is the Mummy who yearns for release, but it would seem to be the workmen whose love for their queen creates in them a momentary desire to unwrap the body:

> Yet none has power the exalted passion to uncoil
> That is her script and body's dress
> Guarding the circle known.
> There Art has mastery, for the Shade
> Distinguishes the paints and oil.

It appears that the workmen's faith is based in part on their inability to read the hieroglyphs on the manuscript protecting the body and in part on their belief that the mummy has acquired the knowledge to decipher the masterpiece and to appreciate true art:

> In death she knows, fine things are finely made;
> Through these the flower, when most alone,
> Returns to its right soil.

Their comparison of her to a flower perhaps alludes to the Egyptian mythological belief that one way for the soul to revisit earth is to return as a flower.

According to Watkins's note the turn in the poem comes in the fourth stanza:

> In the last three verses of the poem the confidence of the workmen is shaken by the soul's experience, and the mummy herself now knows that the widow who cast her two mites into the treasury, which was all she had, had made the right preparation for death. Egyptian burial represents pre-Christian exaltation, resurrection in Wales represents Christian humility. Emerging from one into the other, the mummy has died, and is born. (59)

At this point, however, the poem turns in more ways than Watkins's note would suggest. The first three stanzas are fairly straightforward description of the Egyptian burial from the point of view of the workmen, whereas the fourth and last stanzas record the myth of the mummy's Christian conversion from Watkins's point of view: that is, the thoughts expressed in these stanzas sound suspiciously like the poet's rather than the workmen's.

It is the poet who follows the mummy's soul as it is freed from time to take part in the truth in eternity; it is he who brings about this crisis in time in the form of the poem so that the mummy is no longer bound by the beliefs of Ancient Egyptian mythology; it is he who moves her through time and space from ancient Egypt to modern Wales; and it is

he who imagines her seeing "the Nile confound / Antiquity with present sight" and becoming aware of the existence of the Usk river in Wales (22). One can accept that the mummy's faith in the elaborate ritual is destroyed when on her journey "she, assembling in the light / Earth's broken hieroglyph," discovers some facts about the Nile (the centre of much of Egyptian mythology) which were unknown to her contemporaries. She is "in the light": she has moved to Wales and the Usk and has been assimilated into Watkins's Christian mythology.

The last two and a half lines of this stanza do little to clear up the ambiguity in its point of view. One doubts that the Egyptian craftsmen think:

> All of her is fate,
> Her faith, her necessary breath
> Breathed back, where light is sound. (22)

From the statement in the first half-line and from the clause "her necessary breath / Breathed back," one might think that here one does have the shaken confidence of the workmen who may be thinking of the deity in the Egyptian underworld associated with "fate" from which the papyrus masterpieces would have no power to protect their dead queen (a later Egyptian belief) and about the Opening of the Mouth ceremony which would come at this point in the ritual. From the knotted syntax of the whole, however, it appears that "fate," "faith" and "necessary breath / Breathed back" are

all one and the same, and so the lines state that all she is left with in death is her "faith." In any case, of course, the poet is claiming that neither the craftsmen nor their art have any control over her life after death, but the point is that this is the poet's claim and not the workmen's. Does it not sound too sure and too accepting to be a reflection of the so recent weakening of the workers' trust in art? What, too, is one to make of the description "where light is sound"? In describing the rebirth of the soul in eternity after the Opening of the Mouth ceremony, is Watkins talking about Christianity? or poetry? What Watkins seems to be concerned with in this poem (despite the note) is not the victory of "Christian humility" over "pre-Christian exaltation" in the view of the ordinary person, but with the superiority of Christian art over pagan, and perhaps that explains the confusion of craftsmen with poet.

The fifth stanza (the second to last) is clearer, and it supports the theme outlined by Watkins in the note: that giving up all is the right preparation for eternity. Several sources attribute the Egyptian obsession with the preservation of the body to belief that the soul somehow depended on the body for life after death. In this stanza the mummy who can now speak for the truth (she is now "where light is sound") asks that the embalmers "Dispense / No precious ointment here; my body has cast all," and she instructs them to "seek that holiest treasure laid / A Syrian widow once let fall."

She speaks of the humility she has learned in death ("This contrite darkness") and expresses her faith in the resurrection of the transfigured body that has no need for sustenance or protection (22).

The last three lines, however, are again somewhat obscure. The mummy says,

> 'This contrite darkness never has betrayed
> Love's perfect secret whose disguise
> Sleeps in my lettered pall.'

I take it that "contrite darkness" and "Love's perfect secret" refer to the humility of death and "Christian humility" (as the secret of love or the secret belonging to love), respectively, and so the main clause may mean that death has never let down its relative, humility; but what is one to make of the fact that its "disguise / Sleeps in [the] lettered pall"? Is it the mummy's body that is the "disguise" of the "secret," and if so, do the manuscripts help to protect that "secret" which is already hidden in "contrite darkness" and in her body? Or do the scripts hide the secret and so serve only to deceive? There are just too many abstract words with similar connotations ("darkness," "secret," "disguise" and "sleeps" all suggest secrecy in one form or another, and one is not sure which form) for the statement to be clear, especially if one is to take it as a statement of the mummy's rebirth into "Christian humility."

The last stanza shares the ambiguity of the fourth. It begins: "Dear love, could my true soul believe / The wide heavens merciless ...," and appears to render the thoughts of one of the workmen, but it continues with a private image that is very personal to the poet and used in an earlier poem describing his return to his grandfather's house at Carmarthen, in the region of the Usk. In that poem he spoke of "your stars struck by horses, your sons of God breaking in song" ("Returning to Goleufryn," The Lady with the Unicorn 16). In this he writes

> ... I still would not forsake
> The man-tilled earth to which bones cleave
> While horses race accross
> The neighbouring field, and their hooves shine
> Scattering a starlike wake. (22)

The image comes from the poet's roots in south-eastern Wales in the region of Taliesin's "coracle-river" ("Returning to Goleufryn" 15) and is associated in his mind with praise of God. In both poems it is a vivid and beautiful image, but one suspects it does not belong to the Egyptian workmen. It belongs to the poet.

If read as a reflection of the workmen's thoughts, the last three lines of this stanza are, as are the last three in the two preceding stanzas, the most troublesome:

> Magnanimous morning, if we change no line,
> Shall pierce stone, leaf and moss,
> And the true creature at light's bidding wake.

It seems, together with "man-tilled earth to which bones cleave," to be a statement of the workmen's newly found faith in the relative simplicity of Christian burial (as it would have been practiced in the Carmarthen of Watkins's childhood?). What, though, does "if we change no line" have to do with it (and it appears to have everything)? Do the men now believe that the "Art" of the papyrus masterpieces, although they cannot decipher it, will ensure the mummy's resurrection? Again, that does not seem the intention since the mummy now believes it is best to seek instruction from the story of the widow's mites in the New Testament. Is it this, the literature of "Christian humility," to which the clause above refers? Clearly, I think, it is the poet himself who is speaking in this last stanza of his personal experience of his Welsh and Christian heritage of song, and it is this that he believes must not be changed. In fact, the address at the opening of the stanza may be to Christ, the "Love" of "Love's perfect secret" in the mummy's speech, or it may be an address to poetry of the kind the poet writes here in which the poem is a vehicle for the conversion from paganism to Christianity.

This exalted view of religious poets and poetry is perhaps best seen in the light of its opposite, Watkins's contempt for certain kinds of critics and certain kinds of criticism. Adoring the first caused him to despise the second. The two attitudes are inseparable in one of the

poems occasioned by critical interest in Dylan Thomas after his death (G. Watkins, Portrait 170). The title of the poem is "Exegesis," and it opens with this stanza:

> So many voices
> Instead of one.
> Light that is the driving force
> Of song alone:
> Give me this or darkness,
> The man or his bone. (Fidelities 51)

This statement of the sacred integrity of the poetic word is fully balanced by a definition of criticism as "the man-made echo" in "Poets on Poetry" (103). The first claims that in poetry the word is genuine and eternal, the second that in criticism it is counterfeit and transient.

Some of his most severe statements on critics were made in letters to Michael Hamburger, excerpts of which are quoted by Hamburger in his tribute "Vernon Watkins, A Memoir." In one of the letters Watkins writes of his "disgust" with a review he had just read. It was one, he said, which "made [him] feel, that any poet passing judgment on a living contemporary is damned" (51). The word "damned" is to be taken literally since Watkins believed that criticizing poetry is equivalent to defying God. In another letter he specifies the kind of criticism he regards as contemptible and the kind of poetry he considers inviolable:

> "The critic I despise is the pontifical evaluator of contemporaries, the speculator on the poetic stock exchange, the soulless monster who has never seen or heard of a

> widow's mite. I only despise him as critic." (52)

The reference to the "widow's mite" may point to adverse reviews of his own poetry.

His attitude, however, was more general. In other letters to Hamburger in which he alluded to reviews of Hamburger's poetry, he wrote:

> "I think I've missed few reviews of contemporary poetry in the Listener for several years, but I haven't seen one that was worth printing except for its quotations;" (52)

and

> "You know what I think generally about critics in this country, with perhaps two or three exceptions. I also believe that there can be no great criticism without love, and that the very nature and habit of most critics makes them incapable of an act of love. Their reputations are at stake, and they do not know what an excellent thing it would be to lose them." (52-53)

What he seems to demand of critics in this last excerpt is an act of faith: that is, that they suspend their critical judgment and undergo his "change of heart." If Watkins had his way, critics would become nothing more than worshippers of "the liberating god[s]."

CONCLUSION

Needless to say, not all reviewers and critics, not even some who are poets themselves, are willing to accept the role of the follower for whom the poetic word is sacred so long as it aims to be an expression of "eternity." Few critics of these last several decades have shared Watkins's vision and few have shown more than a passing interest in his poetry despite conditions that were initially favourable to its appeal: the publication of his poems during his life by the prestigious Faber and Faber, the significant number of contemporary reviews of his books that praised the poetry even if they made little attempt to understand it, the position as Visiting Professor in America, the relationship with Dylan Thomas whose work and life became the subject of much critical attention and the critical patronage of one such as Kathleen Raine both before and after his death. Despite all of these propitious circumstances and the honours and awards he received before his death (that he was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1951 and that his book The Death Bell: Poems and Ballads was the first choice of the Poetry Book Society in 1954 are just two of the several listed by Polk and Mathias), Watkins's poetry has not made its way into the canon of modern British poetry. The posthumous re-issue of old poems in new volume selections

and the publication of new poems in Uncollected Poetry (Enitharmon Press, 1969), Ballad of the Outer Dark and Other Poems (Enitharmon Press, 1979) and The Breaking of the Wave (Golgonooza Press, 1979) represent recent attempts by Raine, Pryor and Gwen Watkins to focus critical attention on Watkins. These and the books on Watkins by Mathias, Polk and Gwen Watkins have proved to be largely unsuccessful. Gwen Watkins's Portrait of a Friend, for example, meant in part to present Watkins as "a much more interesting figure" than the stable and rather staid character portrayed in the literature on Dylan Thomas and expected to "bring renewed general interest in his work" (Norris, Foreword), is more likely to be read for the light it throws on Thomas. It remains to be seen whether the most recent attempt, that is the publication of The Collected Poems of Vernon Watkins (Golgonooza Press, 1986), will generate the amount and kind of interest necessary to propel Watkins into the 1990s as something more than a "good" poet who was Dylan Thomas's friend, but at the moment that does not appear to be the case.

Watkins's poetry is not of a kind currently in fashion; more important, it is not of a kind that opens itself readily to understanding or has much on its surface other than its facility in form and rhythm to draw one to it. The poems discussed above may not be among the most accessible given that they depend for our understanding of them on some knowledge of Kierkegaardian concerns, and some are not among

his best; but they do suggest one reason for Watkins's apparent obscurity and they illustrate the lack of attention to the literal in his poetry in general. Even in some of his more transparent visionary lyrics such as "The Caryatids: for Rhiannon Asleep" and "The Heron" (The Death Bell 42-3; 46-7), "Bread and the Stars" (Cypress and Acacia 79-81), "The Crane" (Affinities 25-6) or "Night and the Swan" (Ballad of the Outer Dark 45), poems which seem to depend on the poet's perception of some specific thing in a particular place, there is really very little sense of landscape and little concern with the physical appearance. Almost invariably, the concern is the metaphysical, the significance of the thing from the speaker's point of view, the poet's imaginative insight.

Nature in Watkins's poems is a symbol. The male in nature symbolizes the poet's concern with eternity: "an instant of peace / Beyond time's breakers" ("Night and the Swan" 45). Concern with the physical world Watkins relegates to the female, and in the contrast between the male and female in "The Coots" and "The Peacocks" (The Lady with the Unicorn 26-7; 28) and in "The Crane" he expresses his contempt for the "gift of sense" that would focus on the physical ("The Peacocks"). The females in these poems are the practical and materialistic ones clearly bound to earth whereas the males are the visionary ones inhabiting an inner world that connects them to the eternal.

The contrast is not as pronounced in "The Coots" as it is in the others perhaps because the male coot is not as impressively beautiful or graceful in the nesting ritual as the others are in the mating display; nevertheless, he performs his part in building the nest in the "trance" where "he stretches space / To the space beyond" while she "receive[s] his spoil / With critical eye" and proceeds to "dispose it / To let it dry" (26-7). Practical concerns and judgments are obviously less annoying in such a situation than they are in the mating ritual depicted in "The Peacocks" and "The Crane." Both the "peahen" and the crane's "mate" are portrayed as worldly creatures of "distracted mind" ("The Crane" 25) who must be either taken by force by the god-like male in another version of "Leda and the Swan," perhaps, or "controlled" by "the penumbra of his power" and "compelled" to respond after a prolonged attempt to ignore his "ecstatic state" ("The Crane" 26; 25).

The situation in the two poems is the same and so is the poet's perception of it. There are no surprises in Watkins's natural world for it has been interpreted before it is presented and the poet will not allow it to take on much of a life of its own: the scene and the creatures are archetypal, almost fossilized when seen together as below:

> She pecks about in shells and flint,
> Fearing the dangerous tail displayed.
> Vibrating plumes behind her glint
> With sacred eyes.
> . . . . . .

Her safety is the natural sun;
The natural earth supplies her needs;
Glimpsing her task and life as one,
She pecks for pods and sunflower-seeds.
Her lord, who hates her gift of sense,
Puts on new glory where she goes.
Her lack of interest makes him tense,
Until at last a splendor flows
Down the divine, contracting plumes,
And there, while she unearths a pod,
His hurricane of light consumes
All but the terror of her god.
("The Peacocks" 28)

A bead or trivial thing
Beckons her steps away
From the live dramatic wing.
. . . . . .

Drawn by the opposite
Of the solitude at her side,
She eludes the startled fit
Delusion has deified,
The exalted, staring eyes
Fixed on remotest space.
Against their abstraction she supplies
A movement in time and space.
("The Crane" 25-6)

As for "the extremes" meeting in eternity entering time, symbolized by the moment of union, "Nothing of this she knows" (25).

Watkins would likely have been surprised to find anyone who objected to his use of contrasting female and male birds in these poems to express his conception of the conflicting concerns of time and eternity. The poems are not meant to be read as comments on human female-male relationships any more than they are meant to be objective records of the behaviour of birds. The female birds represent man <u>as man</u>

(Kierkegaard's "natural man") while the males represent man as poet (Kierkegaard's "Christian"). Nevertheless, it is difficult to ignore that the literal images in these poems are redolent of Kierkegaard's attitude towards women, his attributing to woman a concern with the world that would interfere with a religious man's "relation to God" as he does in rationalizing his breaking the engagement to Regine (The Journals, Item 850; 865; 1281). The point is, however, that Watkins probably did not think about the literal implications of his use of these images. His own stance as a poet may be described by the crane's "exalted, staring eyes / Fixed on remotest space," and in that stance is a barrier to understanding and appreciation of his poetry in the four decades it spans and in the two since his death.

His first book of poems was published in 1941 at the end of a decade of poetry committed to social and political issues; yet, for the most part, poems in Ballad of the Mari Lwyd and Other Poems had little to do with such issues. Even "The Collier" and "Sonnet (Pit-Boy)" were more concerned with Biblical and Blakean parallels than they were with protest. By some reviewers the "singing quality" of Watkins's verse was welcomed as an antidote for what one reviewer called the "platform speaking" of the poetry of the thirties (Herring 15; 16); but, while the praise for this quality continued in reviews of his second volume, even among his admirers there were those who regretted that the "immense

technical virtuosity" and "superb imagery" of a poem such as "Sea Music for my Sister Travelling" were not combined with "directness" in the form (Nicholson 39; 40).

With the publication of his third book, Watkins became the subject of tentative short studies attempting to assess his importance for contemporary poetry and to place his work. One of the first of these was written by a partial soul-mate, John Heath-Stubbs, who concluded:

> In such a poem as ["The Song of the Good Samaritan" in The Lady with the Unicorn], magnificent in the clarity of its imagery, and its assured rhythmical sweep, Mr. Watkins shows himself to be among the major poets of our time. (23)

Heath-Stubb's judgment has not stood the test of time, however, and the reason it has not is perhaps best summed up in his description of Watkins's achievement:

> He stands aside from what has been the dominant tendency of modern poetry since Mr. Eliot -- the tendency to bring its language close to that of the market-place, in diction, imagery, and subject matter.... Mr. Watkins has achieved the difficult feat of preserving a traditionally poetic manner, which is, at the same time, never stilted, nor, in the bad sense, artificial or conventional.... This approach to his art places Mr. Watkins in the tradition of Yeats, rather than in that of Mr. Eliot. (19)

The "tendency" Heath-Stubbs speaks of has become the norm, and Watkins in continuing his stubborn adherence to the

"traditionally poetic manner" began ironically to sound more dated in speaking of his eternal world.

With the publication of The Death Bell, there became obvious, also, as David Wright wrote, a certain "monotony of rhythm, in spite of the fact he employs a wide variety of forms and meters.... [A]ll of the poems, whatever their measure or intention, seem to be set to the same key[;]... a monotony of style. [His] vocabulary appears to be taken consistently from the same wardrobe drawer, no matter what sort of poem he is dressing;" and a certain obviousness in "the darned and shiny phrases he often patches his meter up with -- e.g. 'breaking wave,' 'windless air,' 'hurrying waters,' 'violent fury'" (13). In spite of these weaknesses, Wright concludes that Watkins is an "important" contemporary poet since he "find[s] in Watkins' verse ... the gift and birthmark of poets -- the shaping spirit of imagination" (13; 14).

Returning to individual reviews of this, his fourth book, we find Watkins hailed as "one of the finest religious poets of our century" whose "poems plunge into the heart of the natural object, the sea, the pool, the shell, the blossom, the rock, the bird, and through bardic showers of imagery ('Taliesin in Gower') build up a sense of some 'primeval music' moving through it all" (Martz 307; 308). One cannot quarrel with this as an assessment of "Niobe," the poem in this volume singled out by Martz as its "most impressive"

nor with this summary of Watkins's achievement in it: "Niobe is transformed to a sea-whipped rock in Wales, and all the images of nature fuse to form a symbol of maternal grief, enduring and undefeated" (308). To "Niobe" one might add such poems as "The Caryatids" and "The Heron" in which specific images and occasions are concretized enough that one feels the metaphysic of "inwardness" in the stillness of the title images while "Loud the wave breaks" ("The Caryatids" 42), "the gulls / and oyster-catchers scream" and "Sharp rocks drive back the breaking waves, / Confusing sea with air" ("The Heron" 46).

Yet, as another reviewer notes, "The Death Bell ... divides about half and half between poems which are successfully and concretely realized, and those which seem either to begin or end in a poetical rather than a real image" (Meredith 595). This reviewer is not one of the ones to trust to generalities. He continues, illustrating the point:

> In the latter group, the language runs to archaism, abstraction and hyperbole. The adjectives: timeless, magnanimous, sublime, holy; the verbs: spurn, enshrine, transfigure, bereave; the nouns (or props): portent, soul, moans, loins -- useful words, all -- are too frequent, too crucial, and too little founded on concrete circumstances. The successful poems ... are the ones where the poet actually observes the occasion of his emotion and finds an unrestrained imagery in or near the experience. These tend to be the shorter poems, often originating in the contemplation of a simple object -- an old volume of Dante and Guido, a sea-bird, a shell. (595).

Even at that, one must agree with Snodgrass who feels (despite his approval of the "bird-watching poems" as "deft and ornate") "that the poor little creatures are toting a good bit of metaphysical luggage" (238).

To continue the metaphor, it is, of course, the "luggage" and not the carrier (the image) that is important to Watkins, and the distance between his attitude and that of mainstream poets and critics of modern and contemporary poetry was becoming increasingly obvious by 1959, the year he published Cypress and Acacia, his fifth book. Louis Simpson, commenting on it in a review of twenty books for Hudson Review, had ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, he chooses it as one of the "four books of another kind, which have been mixed in with the lot, seemingly by accident." The "lot" are candidates for his "masterpieces of dullness, mishapenness and folly that lurk in the Absolute" (284). By contrast to those who pay little attention to the "form and meaning of words" (286), he quotes Watkins in part of "Bread and the Stars" and "Ode" and asks

> And why not? After the forty-year fidgets of modern verse, for God's sake, why not? If we could keep some of the grains of those forty years -- for example, the hardness and particularity of language -- and yet not be ashamed to speak of the universe as though it mattered to us personally! (289)

On the other hand, he says, "Mr. Watkins's poetry is not a kind that immediately appeals to me" given that it insists "we surrender ourselves to a vision" (288) and its "grandeur" is "not often pegged down to familiar details" (289).

Roy Fuller was sure of his response -- "wrong I think it is" -- even while he struggled to articulate it:

> Is the langauge too latinate? Is there too little concrete observation to support the reflection? Too many words? Not really, though Mr. Watkins' generalized poetry is less successful than his occasional. Certainly the diction seems to be weakened by archaic imagery, and literary turns: e.g. 'a viol's sound'; 'the poet sang'; 'I tell my soul.' (73; 74)

After noting that "too much of the verse is anapaestic" and that the whole "lacks a sense of humour," Fuller concludes with what he admits are "stern words": "the present volume ... does seem to me to mark a point beyond which lies mostly wind and water" (74).

Not quite as severe in his judgment of the book or in his prediction is Robin Skelton. He thinks that

> At his best [Watkins] can make use of words, phrases, rhythms, and notions to which we have long been accustomed in such a way as to reassert traditional values and perceptions, and impress us with the strength and validity of a view of the world which rests firmly upon Christian belief and reverence for visionaries of the past. (362)

Unfortunately, he suggests, this comment applies to only a few poems in the book which, on the whole, fails, since "The verse often appears to be a vehicle for a perception rather than an act of perception in itself" as a result of the "literary vocabulary," the "abstract" symbols that "exist as allusions rather than perceptions" and "the bland polished archetypes" (361-2).

Harsher criticism was to follow the publication of Watkins's next book. Irritated by what he thought the book-jacket puffery, Martin Dodsworth responded with what he knew would sound "crabbed and cantankerous" criticism that the poems in Affinities are "derivative" of Yeats in content (35) and marred by "clumsiness of phrase and image" (36), and, as expected, he repeats the complaint that "there is very little particularity in Watkins' description of the natural scene" (37). Watkins is reported by McCormick to have commented on this review, "Well! I've never been called a lump before!" ("Vernon Watkins: A Bibliography 46). Another reviewer's conclusion that Watkins's "technical skill compensates for any lack of vigour" (Sergeant 251) is praise that serves as much to damn and does not answer the criticisms levelled against Watkins by Dodsworth who is not as "sophomoric and incoherent" as McCormick claims ("Vernon Watkins: A Bibliography" 46). Dodsworth is merely less tactful in stating all of the criticisms separately and grudgingly admitted by some of Watkins's admirers.

A more successful attempt to answer such criticism is made by a fellow Welsh poet. Leslie Norris, on re-reading "Autumn Song" in the light of the six volumes of Watkins's poems that appeared up to the winter of 1966, wrote:

> Indeed we could see, if we were very sensitive, all Watkins' gifts and many of his idiosyncracies already present in this unimportant little poem. [Norris's initial response to the poem had been "charming but very slight".] Already he is a poet with most unusual gifts in the manipulation of music and rhythm; already he is a master of firm design; already he does not care one way or another about fashion -- if he wants to he will invert [Norris had mentioned the "unnecessary inversion" in the fourth line of the poem] -- and already we can see by a certain ordinariness in his visual images (blue shoes, wet grass) that his imagination is primarily auditory. ("The Poetry of Vernon Watkins" 4)

Norris accounts for this last weakness in terms of Watkins's strength and excuses it on that basis:

> He worked, then as now, 'from music and cadence' and we must forgive him his visual clumsiness. He worked 'by night' and for him 'natural observation meant nothing ... without the support of metaphysical truth' [Norris is quoting Watkins in the foreword to D.T.: Letters to V.W.]. These are certainly grave drawbacks, particularly in a society where poetry is judged largely by the individuality and truth of a visual and personal imagery. Many critics have complained that for so careful a writer, Watkins' work possesses too many clichés, too many expected metaphors. But since these are almost always commonplaces of visual description, we must read him for quite other qualities.... (4-5)

Those qualities of "verbal pattern" Norris identifies as "mastery of rhythm" and meter ("Sea Music for my Sister Travelling" is a "sea-symphony, full of astonishing and surging lines and images") (4-6), yet even for Norris, Watkins's best poems are ones such as "Returning to Golefryn" in which, he says, "eye and ear combine in a felicity of warm imagery" and "Rhossili" in which "Using a long line, like the margin of foam breaking on that marvelous five-mile beach, Watkins evokes the scene so vividly that it is like our first discovery of it" (7). The same preference for the vivid detail is implicit in Norris's comment that the title bird of "The Heron" appears to him to be "a heraldic heron, remembered in the study, formalised, not 'seen' as the poem demands" (9).

Whether or not it is right to demand of a metaphysical poet that he give an accurate and animated picture of the natural world, many readers clearly do. The demand does not seem unreasonable when the poet is using the physical as a symbol of his subjective perception of the eternal as Watkins often is. Nor does it seem unreasonable to ask that technical skill be combined with freshness in expression. Otherwise, where is the skill? It is too often the case in Watkins that he does not pay attention to the sense of words chosen for mastery of form and rhythm or care that the language may appear dead.

Besides dissatisfaction with Watkins's preference in his poems for sound and form over all other elements, there is, in poets who came after him, dissatisfaction with the vision he expresses. Two of these younger poets were drawn to Watkins early in their careers. Philip Larkin first met him at an address Watkins gave to the English Club at Oxford "around 1943" ("Vernon Watkins: an Encounter and a Re-encounter" 28). Michael Hamburger met him near the same time, in 1942, on one of Watkins's visits to Dylan Thomas at the Swiss pub on Old Compton Street ("Vernon Watkins, a Memoir" 46). The friendships then formed continued, except for brief periods when the two lost touch with Watkins, for the remainder of Watkins's life, Larkin seeing him for the last time about a year before Watkins's death and Hamburger seeing him just before Watkins left for America the last time; but while the friendships lasted, the early influence Watkins had on the two younger poets did not.

Impressed at their first meeting by Watkins's reading of Yeats ("unashamedly sonorous, it may have been founded on Yeats's own method, for it suited the poems admirably") the young Larkin went to see Watkins at Bradwell to return the books Watkins had "pressed on" members of his audience at the end of a very long talk (28-9). Larkin records Watkins's temporary influence on him in a characteristically wry manner:

> By this time I was deeply impressed by him -- or perhaps I should say strongly, for some of my admiration was without

> doubt very shallow.... His devotion to poetry was infectious: his likes became my likes, his methods my methods, or attempted methods. At the same time I could never quite expel from my mind a certain dubiety, a faint sense of being in the wrong galley. (29)

Writing in this memorial of Watkins's comments on his own first book, The North Ship, Larkin says, "he was extremely generous about the contents, though they must have struck him as painfully imitative" (31). In his introduction to the second edition of The North Ship Larkin identified the main influence as Yeats and attributed it to the meeting with Watkins (8-9).

With Larkin, the influence of Yeats and of Watkins (if he is not confusing the two when he says of Watkins above, "his methods [became] my methods") was on technique:

> As a result of [the first meeting with Watkins] I spent the next three years trying to write like Yeats, not because I liked his personality or understood his ideas but out of infatuation with his music (to use the word I think Vernon used). (Introduction 9)

Yet it was to poetry with a very different vision as well as style that Larkin turned almost immediately after the publication of that first book and, co-incidently, loss of contact with Watkins immediately following the war. By the time he met Watkins again "in about 1957," Larkin had discovered Hardy and "had," as he says, "settled into a poetic tradition very different from Vernon's and found much of what he said [in

criticism of Hardy and in defense of Yeats] unacceptable..." ("Vernon Watkins" 21; 32). He adds, "but [Watkins] always retained the power to convince me that he knew what he was talking about" (32), and perhaps it is for that reason that Larkin continued to value the friendship despite the differences in their visions.

Larkin's vision was dark whereas Watkins's was "light" (a word Larkin uses to describe the "texture" of Watkins's poems in his Watkins obituary for the Times; qtd. in G. Watkins, Portrait 212). Larkin's voice, too, sharing "the Movement's predominantly anti-romantic, witty, rational, sardonic tone" (Drabble 674), was all that Watkins's was not, and that voice has had much more of an impact on contemporary poetry than Watkins's. Hamburger, the other poet for whom Watkins was an early model, also questions the metaphysical foundation on which Watkins's poetry is based and for him the initial influence on content was more pronounced, making the reaction perhaps more detrimental for Watkins's general influence.

The early stage of Hamburger's relationship with Watkins falls into a familiar pattern, established first in Dylan Thomas's and repeated to some extent in Larkin's. In the seminal Watkins-Thomas relationship, the poets at the beginning exchanged poems in manuscript and listened, if not always receptively, to each other's comments on particular words.

From Hamburger's account, though, it appears that this aspect of his association with Watkins was rather more one-sided:

> As far as poetry is concerned our relations were closest in the early and middle 'fifties, when I sent many poems to Vernon for criticism, dedicated a poem to him and received his Epithalamion for our marriage in 1951. ("Vernon Watkins, a Memoir" 49)

The one-sidedness may be explained in part by concern for the proprieties, Hamburger being the younger and less established poet (Thomas was also the younger but he had already published his first book of poems by the time he and Watkins met), but it probably also owes something to Watkins's resistance to negative criticism of his poems by anyone, and that came to include Thomas. At his first meeting with Thomas in 1935 Watkins seems to have been very receptive to Thomas's criticism -- "He showed me what was fresh in my work and what was not" (qtd. in G. Watkins, Portrait 4) -- and for the next four years he took great delight in the mutual readings and criticism, a delight he records in describing their meetings in Thomas's rooms at 5 Gwmdonkin Drive:

> More times than I can call to mind
> I heard him reading there.
> . . . . . .
>
> That was the centre of the world,
> That was the hub of time.
> The complex vision faded now,
> The simple grew sublime.

> There seemed no other valid stair
> For wondering feet to climb.
> ("A True Picture Restored: Memories of Dylan Thomas," Affinities 31)

There Thomas made him a party to "That strictest, lie-disrobing act / Testing the poem read" (31) and Watkins's "admiration ... turn[ed] into hero-worship" (G. Watkins, Portrait 25), but by 1939 there were signs of strain in the relationship, one of which is Thomas's complaint that Watkins is becoming like John Prichard (Thomas spells it "Pritchard") "in refusing to accept adverse criticism" (Dylan Thomas: Letters to Vernon Watkins 53).

Perhaps by the time he met Hamburger, Watkins realized that whatever the apparent similarity in vision between himself and other poets he met, there was likely to be a difference of opinion on his preference for "cadence" over content. He seems at least to have recognized, perhaps in retrospect, that such was the difference between himself and Thomas who "work[ed] from the concrete image outward" (Introduction, Dylan Thomas: Letters to Vernon Watkins 13). It was also this preference that caused him to disagree with Hamburger's negative criticism of Heinrich Heine's short poems:

> "In the short poems which many despise I find the expression of great genius. The key to the apparent triteness of some poems is in the cadence, which is the reverse of trite." (qtd. in Hamburger 53)

Thinking that, that the control of "cadence" is "the expression of great genius," and having himself a close to "infallible ear" as Hamburger recognized (see below), it is no wonder that Watkins was the less receptive one in his relationships with other poets when it came to mutual criticism of poems.

There is much in their methods that would have separated Hamburger and Watkins, but the difference in visions was the principal one. Hamburger's interest in Watkins's poetry was clearly sparked and lost on the basis of content. Of the early period, Hamburger says,

> What Vernon and Gower meant to me as a poet at that period becomes clear to me when I re-read my poem 'The Dual Site,' not dedicated to Vernon, yet dominated by his image and the wild life of Gower, including the ravens he had shown me on one of our walks.... Vernon's image is fused in one of the two conflicting selves in that poem, though Vernon's other self -- that of the bank cashier who took the bus to Swansea morning after morning, year after year -- also lent certain features to the other person of the poem. (49)

It was not long, however, before the narrowness of Watkins's vision caused Hamburger some uneasiness:

> Yet Vernon accepted the division that tormented me. I did not want those spheres to be wholly separate; and I wanted my poems to draw on both of them even if it meant sacrificing intensity to a wider awareness of heterogeneous, recalcitrant realities. These differences never became explicit between us, and our friendship continued, although the divergence increased in later years; but

> we ceased to comment on each other's work. (49-50)

The tact on both sides must have been exemplary, for Hamburger's rejection of Watkins's poetic Christian eternity was complete:

> In later years I could not accept that creed ["an almost mystical creed ... that enabled Vernon to reconcile his religion of art with his Christian faith"] or Vernon's romantic cult of poets, as in the poems collected in his book Affinities.... (50-51)

Hamburger articulates the probable response of many present reviewers, critics and readers and helps to explain Watkins's position as a good, but not influential poet, when he says in summary:

> Vernon purified and intensified his vision, perhaps at the cost of certain potentialities [not covered by it].... The variety of his work lies in its extraordinary range of forms and meters, by no means always traditional, yet always mastered and made his own by an infallible ear. His range of themes and imagery was circumscribed by the constancy of his allegiances, as his musical range was not; and this has to do with anti-realistic, anti-rational premisses hardly reconcilable with many phenomena of the modern world. (56)

Watkins's response to this kind of criticism of the content of his poems is implied in his "Note on Permanence" in art:

> It seems to me that in our age there is a much greater understanding of effect, than of permanence. Permanence itself is suspect in the eyes and minds of many

> artists, as they believe that all is flux. The dimensions of time are so complex that in a sense this is true. Yet to create art and neglect the Greater Eternity Blake believed in, or some equivalent of it, is to work in confusion. (qtd. in G. Watkins, Foreword)

He believed, like Kierkegaard, that "What ... the age needs in the deepest sense can be said fully and completely with one single word: it needs ... eternity" (Kierkegaard, Preface, "'The Individual': Two 'Notes' Concerning My Work as an Author," The Point of View 107). As for his mastery of form, meter and music, that was an element of his belief in the pattern of eternity. He could not have written otherwise and still held that belief. This conviction he expresses in his poem "Affirmation" which begins "Out, sceptic, betrayed by your own style: / No faith and loose measures go hand in hand" and ends in the declaration:

> Joy singing governs all we create
> As weir waters, feeling the Earth rotate,
> Amass, falling, a music always begun.
> (The Breaking of the Wave 465)

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