THE POETRY OF VERNON WATKINS: A CRITICAL STUDY

by

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ABSTRACT

Two questions concerning the poetry of Vernon Watkins are raised in this thesis. First, what factors are responsible for the neglect of Watkins by critics and by the poetry-reading public? Second, does Watkins' use of the unfashionable subjects of nature and religion, expressed in traditional forms of verse, signify that his poetry has little of value or interest to modern readers?

A study of the elements of his poetry proves Watkins to be a fine craftsman whose verse is marked by beauty, variety, and control. His deeply held beliefs regarding nature, time, and religion are expressed in poetry which mirrors the integrity of its author.

Watkins' neglect by critics therefore does not stem from any lack of skill or inspiration on his part, but from a number of factors, the most important of which are these: his avoidance of distinctively twentieth century problems and interests in favor of eternal questions; and his tendency to impart an abstract and withdrawn tone to certain poems, especially those on religious subjects.

Because he deals with questions of universal rather than of particular concern, Watkins taps sources deep in man's spirit. The answer to the second question, therefore, is that Watkins has a great deal to offer men of today; and the best of his poetry—the exceptionally fine ballads and the sea poems—seem destined to stand the test of time.
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INTRODUCTION

I am your peace, wherever fortune move you,
Your strength, your birthright and your native ground.
I wait to give, whether men scorn or love you,
Prodigal strength, returning to my sound.
Not while you live, but when grass waves above you,
When you are dead, your labour shall be crowned.
("Muse, Poet and Fountain")

The author of these lines, Vernon Watkins, brought out his first book of verse in 1941, and has published regularly since that time, his latest volume appearing in 1963. Indeed, he writes that he began "scribbling verse at eight or nine years of age." This long and prolific career notwithstanding, Watkins has been somewhat neglected by critics and has never become a popular poet among the poetry-reading public.

Watkins himself, it should be noted at once, cares little for fame in any form. As he has said, "In the death of ambition, let patience be born" ("Trust Darkness"). And it is of course true that Watkins has won a respectful following among serious students of English verse. Robert Hillyer, for example, has said, "If the names of great poets in lyric mood occur to us in reading him, it is not from any derivative element in Watkins' work, but because of his equal claim on our attention." Still, it is true that many critics have tended to overlook Watkins, often because of his supposed connection with the now defunct Apocalypse movement; and the general reading public has known him, if at

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1Personal communication to the author, Sept. 12, 1963.

all, as the friend of Dylan Thomas.

That Watkins was the rarest kind of friend--one who would lend not only his own suit of clothes, but money as well--is shown in the collection of letters from Thomas to Watkins. In these letters, the two poets discussed each other's work, and their own, frankly; and at one point Thomas made the teasing but apparently sincere remark that Watkins was "the only other poet except me whose poetry I really like today...." Yet today, more than ten years after his death, Thomas is still the subject of critical attention from all sides, while Watkins receives relatively little notice.

Perhaps, however, there is nothing really surprising in the widely different course of the two poets' careers. For they were, though close to one another in affection and in dedication to poetry, not close at all in personality or in their styles of verse. Their very manner of living set the two far apart. The glamour, the notoriety, the tragic ending of Thomas' life made it one which could not fail to catch public attention. Watkins' life, on the other hand, has been one of quiet and conscientious duty to the traditional claims of country, church, and family. In their writing, too, differences between Thomas and Watkins were more marked than the resemblances. Both disliked the sociological poetry of the thirties; both, according to Watkins, were religious poets. But as Watkins has pointed out:

"...our approach to it [poetry] and our way of working presented a complete contrast. Dylan worked upon a symmetrical

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4Ibid., p. 127.
abstract with tactile delicacy; out of a lump of texture or nest of phrases he created music, testing everything by physical feeling, working from the concrete image outwards. I worked from music and cadence towards the density of physical shape. 2

Here, then, are two poets whose work must be considered separately, as being the outgrowth of two very different lives, attitudes, and personalities, as well as of different methods of creation. Because comparison and contrast between Watkins and Thomas can only reinforce the awareness of these differences, and because only time can properly assess the degree of genius granted to each, no such comparison will be attempted in this paper.

If it is unrewarding, on the whole, to look at Watkins only in reference to his connection with Dylan Thomas, it is even less rewarding to consider him in connection with the poetic movement called "The New Apocalypse." Though Kenneth Rexroth, in his survey of trends in modern poetry, notes that Watkins is difficult to place because he seems to lie outside the general patterns of our time, 6 most critics have unhesitatingly included him as a minor poet of the Apocalyptic movement.

The members of this movement, led by J. F. Hendry and Henry Treece, and with Dylan Thomas revered as a god of inspiration, banded together in the disturbed years preceding the outbreak of World War Two. Their program had four main doctrines:

1) Man was in need of greater freedom, economic no less than aesthetic, from machines and mechanistic thinking.

2) that no existent political system, Left or Right; no artistic ideology, Surrealism or the political school of Auden, was able to provide this freedom.

3) that the Machine Age had exerted too strong an influence on art, and had prevented the individual development of Man.

4) that Myth, as a personal means of re-integrating the personality, had been neglected and despised."

The Apocalyptic program, then, dealt not only with poetry, but with political life as well. As citizens in the political world, the Apocalyptics united on the side of myth, "the living and organic expression of human need, against the attempt by newspapers, governments, and systematic organization to manipulate men as part of a State Machine." 

That this emphasis led some members into Marxism is not surprising. As men, the Apocalyptics attempted to re-establish the value of the creative mind, feeling that they could best serve the general human interest by exercising "the specific human function, which is to write poetry...." As poets, they attempted to derive what was positive from surrealism--its effort to realize some of the characteristics and dimensions of man's inner and submerged being; but they denied its negative side--the refusal to acknowledge man's right to exercise conscious control over the outpourings from his subconscious. More interested in being poets than in being persons, the Apocalyptics were "more or less resigned to losing touch with a great many of the super-

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9. Ibid., p. 31.

10. Ibid., p. 3.
ficial interests of common life." In their efforts to describe subjective experience accurately, the Apocalyptics were willing to appear odd, unusual, or labored; and though they expected audiences to make the effort to speak their language and imitate their attitudes, they were resigned to being misunderstood.

Hopes were high when the Apocalyptic movement began. In 1942, Francis Scarfe commented, "The Apocalyptic movement is to mean liberation from a purely objective world, a reaction against the objective reporting of the thirties, against mass-observation and the parochial conception of 'observing' which was evolved by the followers of Auden and Grigson." And G. S. Fraser concluded that "the poetry of the Apocalyptics is likely to have a certain permanent clinical value for the human race."

Today, however, the movement seems dated and unsuccessful. Geoffrey Moore has called the resulting poetry a cross between "surrealism and imitation-Thomas." Babette Deutsch remarks that the significance of the movement was probably symptomatic rather than intrinsic, and adds that none of the members has achieved the distinction of such literary forebears as D. H. Lawrence, Herbert Read, or Dylan Thomas. And

11 G. S. Fraser, "Introduction," White Horseman, p. 29.
12 Ibid., pp. 27-29.
14 "Introduction," White Horseman, p. 29.
Geoffrey Moore, making the expected but unwarranted connection between
Vernon Watkins and the Apocalypse concludes, "The heterogenous and com­
ponent elements of the New Apocalypse drifted apart, and some of the
members, like Vernon Watkins and G. S. Fraser, freed from the burden,
developed into excellent poets and critics."^7 Because of this reiter­
ated linking of Watkins and the Apocalypse, I have explained the move­
ment in some detail. But note what Watkins himself has said of the
connection:

I was asked to contribute to the "apocalyptic" anthology The
White Horseman at the beginning of the War, but I knew nothing
about this book beyond the five poems which I offered to the
Editors, and I was never a member of this or of any surrealist
group. [Italics mine] It would have conflicted with my own
beliefs to subscribe to either category.18

It seems unfortunate, therefore, that Watkins' name has been
associated so often with a group which, despite its good intentions and
high goals, now appears as "a burden" to its former members.

Less attention has been paid to the more fruitful subject of
Watkins as a member of the Welsh revival. In the thirties, the poetry
of a number of young Welshmen gained prominence. Because this Welsh
revival, as it is called, featured such a variety of styles, there was
nothing of the nature of an organized or imitative school about the move­
ment. But the work of such poets as Dylan Thomas, Lynette Roberts, Alun
Lewis, Keidrych Rhys, Glyn Jones, Brenda Chamberlain, and, of course,
Vernon Watkins, showed enough common characteristics to justify regarding

17"Dylan Thomas," p. 269.
18Personal communication to the author, Sept. 12, 1963.
it as a genuine poetic movement with organic roots in Welsh as well as in English culture. These poets shared a distaste for the colorless Georgianism of earlier English-writing Welsh poets, and for the mechanical and intellectualist aspects of the typical poetry of the thirties in England. But above all, they were Welsh. As Geoffrey Moore has said, "...the mere fact of being born in a country so small, so clannish, and so fiercely nationalistic as Wales is meaningful in itself...The national feeling engendered by so many hundreds of years of Welsh speaking survives now without the actual bond of language." 20

The strong environmental factors influencing these poets of the Welsh revival have been divided by Woodcock into five categories: socio-political, geographical, mythological, cultural, and religious. 21

The socio-political situation in Wales in the thirties was characterized by grievous economic conditions. Tendencies toward separatist sentiments on one hand and toward a radical labor movement on the other were inflamed by the mining strikes of the time, and by the great depression, probably more severe in Wales than elsewhere in Britain. Though despair and resentment against the English were the prime feelings in the mining valleys, the young poets of the time created their best poetry in a mood of pity, not of bitterness. 22 Of the five categories, this is the only one which is probably no longer a strong influence on Welsh writers.


22 Ibid., pp. 295-296.
A land of mountains and barren moorland, sparsely populated, with even its cities in close proximity to seacoast or farm land, Wales offers its inhabitants contact with nature at its most impressive and desolate. Welsh poets of past and present can thus be found to have a "sharp and fresh awareness of the meaning of country living and of its underlying tragedies," and, as might be expected, an almost complete avoidance of urban-machine imagery. 23

Ancient British mythology is still an influence in Wales. Thus, Welsh children may be given the names of legendary heroes, such as Dylan; ancient fertility customs may still occasionally be found in rural Wales; and the emotional preaching in village churches may recall the incantations of the Druids. Though the influence of ancient myth is pervasive, its effect on Welsh poets is most often expressed obliquely through what Woodcock terms "a superficially Christian symbolism." 24

Culture in Wales, as a poetic influence, has stemmed primarily from two sources: the influence of the native Celtic literary tradition, and the Welsh speech habits. Verse in the native Celtic tradition often had as its most distinctive feature a strong conservatism in matters of structure. Because such poetry was limited in its technical variations, the mark of poetic virtuosity was the ability to attain originality of expression within an accepted form. 25 Thus, this verse was usually highly decorative, full of images strung together, almost glittering with phrases. At the same time it managed to keep something of the flavor of a conversation between friends. Because the chief social function of such traditional

23 Ibid., p. 298.
24 Ibid., pp. 299-300.
25 Ibid., p. 301.
verse was praise or eulogy, poems were often "official"--that is, about public events of no personal relationship to the author. Yet its poets were not out of touch with the realities of life. Indeed, in their treatment of death, Welsh poets avoided the style which produced what Anthony Conran calls "English poetical obituary notices" in favor of a presentation of death in all its stark grimness.26

Of the second cultural influence--the speech habits of the Welsh people--Woodcock says: "In the conversation of ordinary Welsh people, and particularly in the oratory of the chapel preachers, there is a perpetual tendency to create new and ornate metaphors."27 Little wonder that such imaginative speech would influence young poets! Through other Welsh speech habits, such as verbal inversion and the tendency to translate Welsh phrases directly into English without changing them into English idiom, Welsh poets have extended the flexibility of English as a literary language.

The importance of religion in Wales is perhaps best illustrated by Geoffrey Moore's comment that "the Welsh are the only people I know who sing hymns at football matches and in pubs...."29 Woodcock adds that no matter how secular his background, no child in Wales can avoid contact with the eloquence and passion of Cambrian religion.30

28Ibid., pp. 301-302.
The chapel is important in Welsh communities not only as a religious center, but as a center of social, cultural, moral, and liberal political force. The sermons of the preacher, who needs to have a good deal of the actor in his makeup, have as their climax the "hwyl"—a sort of incantation sung by the preacher in an attempt to cast a spell over his congregation and to inflame their spiritual propensities. In many Welsh poets is found a touch of this spirit, existing in a certain incantatory style and in a taste for the dramatic. But the subject matter of the sermons has had its effect, too. As Woodcock puts it, "The dark and tortured religion of the revivalists, with its fire-and-brimstone damnation, its concrete and almost chiliastic view of Heaven, and its tacit recognition of the role of sin in the way of salvation, looms always in the background of the Welsh poet's consciousness." 31 In Welsh poetry, this influence often shows itself in saturation with Biblical and Christian imagery.

All of these aspects of the influence of Wales on its poets are noticeable in Watkins' verse, some more importantly than others. Certainly the geographical influence of the Welsh countryside has been tremendous. And in a number of ways—his conservatism in form, and his liking for the eulogy—Watkins is close to the traditional Welsh poetry. On the other hand, the socio-political atmosphere of Wales does not appear prominently in Watkins. And though he is religious, his training has been in the Church of England, not in the revivalist chapels. In fact, a reader who did not know that Watkins was Welsh would miss little

of the significance of his poetry. A few titles mentioning the country by name, a few lines concerning its people, touches of folk lore in some of his ballads: these are the only outward notes of nationality in Watkins. Nor is his use of language at all strange to English or American ears. His Welshness, then, should present no barrier to the reader's or critic's understanding or appreciation of Watkins' poetry.

Perhaps Robert Hillyer, in praising the poet, touches upon one possible reason for Watkins' lack of critical notice:

"...Watkins' lyric quality is more concentrated, less free-wheeling, than Thomas's, and he is eloquently at ease among traditional forms. His phrasing has a certain magnificence unusual in contemporary poetry, and his long discipline in rhyme and meter gives him the assured music that we often look for elsewhere in vain....Images that are fresh yet inevitable embody large themes, philosophical or religious, which indicate a contemplative mind and profound emotions."

The key in this paragraph lies in the word "traditional." For Watkins is in many ways a traditional poet, not in the sense of one who tries "to convey easily conveyable ideas through a pleasingly decorative medium," but in the sense of one who is a conserver of past excellences. And only a hair's-breadth separates the traditional from the unfashionable.

In his subject matter, for instance, Watkins makes frequent use of Christian themes and problems. And although some critics have observed a resurgence in recent years of appreciation for religious literature, there is still great truth in Douglas Bush's comment:

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32In Pursuit of Poetry, p. 207.


Whereas the Middle Ages and the Renaissance were concerned with making pagan literature not only safe but morally helpful for Christian readers, the problem now is to make Christian literature acceptable to predominantly pagan readers in what it has become fashionable to call the post-Christian era.35

Watkins is also a poet whose main inspiration is found in nature. And although in this area, too, a resurgence of sympathy can be noted, it is still true that, as Langbaum suggests, "...the term nature poetry has fallen into such disrepute that no one wants to apply it to poems he likes...."36

If Watkins' poetry may at first seem, in its main emphases, out of date, or at least out of the mainstream of modern poetry, it seems equally so in what it does not emphasize. For, like most of his Welsh compatriots, Watkins shows little interest in urban-machine civilization. A man who loves the countryside and seashore, he has little to say about the desolation of city life and the bored disillusion of its people—subjects which have been given such detailed expression in our generation. Nor does Watkins show much overt social or political interest, outside of a few poems showing concern with the fate of Welsh miners, and a very few, considering his lengthy service in the Royal Air Force, dealing with the Second World War.

In the form of his poetry, Watkins is likewise conservative. His verse contains no oddities of punctuation, no peculiar stanza shapes, no experimental or startling innovations.

Of all the elements which may have combined to obscure Watkins'  


notice by the public, is this use of the traditional in form and in subject matter the one most responsible? Or is there a deeper reason for a certain failure of communication between Watkins and his readers? More importantly, is there anything of value to skeptical, materialistic, urban-centered modern man in poetry which deals with the life of the spirit in its experience with a God-created natural world? These are the questions to be considered in this paper.
Much has been written about the relationship between form and content in poetry. Is it possible to speak separately of meter and rhythm, diction, rhyme schemes, and imagery? Or do these elements have such an intimate connection with the content of the poem that they cannot in any way be isolated? Most critics would agree that form and content are to poetry as water and sunlight are to the growth of a tree. Derek Savage, for example, says:

The poet's urge...which drives him toward the act of creation, arises from a profound need to comprehend his experience, to discover within its apparently haphazard disorder an inner significance, an inner wholeness—in fact, form.¹

But still it is possible at least to recognise and discuss the elements generally included in the category of form. As Savage adds,

...while it is quite true to say that form in poetry is an interior quality, nevertheless that inner quality must have some outward expression which can be seized upon as, to some extent, representing or embodying it.²

With the understanding, then, that form in poetry is "the outer form of inner reality, not of surface,"³ this section will take up its study of those elements of form which give Watkins' poetry its special nature or style.

²Ibid., p. 32.
³Karl Shapiro, Beyond Criticism (University of Nebraska, 1953), p. 41.
i. Meter and Rhythm

If one element which goes into the make-up of the poem can be said to be the frame or loom on which the other elements are woven, it must be that of meter. In its simplest form as a regular, though never entirely exact, pulsing beat, meter is a facet of experience to which human beings have responded through the ages. But the significance of meter in a poem goes far beyond any mere tapping of beats. Brooks and Warren have pointed out its effect on the poet's audience: "By the regularity of the meter, the reader of poetry may be put into a state of greater susceptibility to the suggestions of ideas, attitudes, feelings, and images contained in the poem."\(^4\) To the poet himself, "Meter is the frame of poetry. It frames not only the whole with symmetry but it frames each part within the larger frame....Meter drives rhythm into pattern; it does the same with imagery and sound. The lines of force in a poem can be traced through meter; without it everything else is in danger of dislocation."\(^5\) Meter also has an intimate connection with meaning. Thus, "...we do not feel meter separately from meaning; we feel the double weight of the right thing said with the right pressure and the right speed."\(^6\)

If the function of meter, then, is to serve both as a unifying device which provides the satisfaction of a recurrent beat or pulse and also as a source of meaning, what is the function of rhythm in a poem? John Crowe Ransom has given a simple definition: "The rhythm is the


\(^5\)Beyond Criticism*, p. 43.

\(^6\)Ibid., pp. 31-32.
marriage of the meter and the language...."7 Derek Savage makes the distinction that "form as a total quality manifests itself partially as rhythm....And rhythm shows itself externally as meter."8 A closely related and very workable distinction is made by John Hollander when he uses meter to refer to the norm or scheme and rhythm to refer to the actual instance in a line of poetry.9 It is in this latter sense, then, that the terms will be used in this paper.

The ability of Watkins to achieve the metrical effect he wants through "the right thing said with the right pressure and the right speed"10 is readily seen in his mastery of pace. As John Ciardi explains,

One poem may obviously urge the voice at a faster pace than does another. Within the same poem, moreover, one part may urge itself much more rapidly than another. Even within an individual line, one phrase may clearly be indicated as moving more rapidly or more slowly than another....every good piece of writing, and poetry in particular, carries within it a series of unmistakable notations that tell the good reader how any given passage should be read.11

Thus, even in their immediate effect, some of Watkins' poems have a stately movement:

Tragedy once was dignified by the dance.
Life could overturn fate, an heroic tongue.
Still refusing betrayal,
Feel in the dark the accord of angels.
("Ode")

10Beyond Criticism, p. 43.
Others are clipped and rapid:

The poles are flying where the two eyes set:
America has not found Columbus yet.
("Discoveries")

Some have a leisurely pace:

The mare lies down in the grass where the nest of the skylark is hidden.
Her eyes drink the delicate horizon moving behind the song.
("The Mare")

Others are lilting:

Dark the words break:
The spring rebounds
Knocking awake
With earlier sounds
Forests and hills
Enchanted here
Where water spills
From year to year.
("The Spring")

Whatever the immediate effect, Watkins' poems are never without a metrical pattern. He achieves variety, however, both in the number of patterns used and in the construction of meter and rhythm within each pattern.

Watkins' verse includes, for instance, many stanzas with very short lines, often of only two rhythmic feet:

Time that is over
Comes not again;
Yet instinctive
The strings remain.
All is fugitive,
Nothing vain.
("Touch With Your Fingers")

Hid in the hollow
Of a rounded bark,
I heard swift, swallow,
Fly through the dark.
("Taliesin's Voyage")

But he also employs extremely long lines, as illustrated in these lines
of seven feet:

Late I return, 0 violent, colossal, reverberant, eaves-dropping sea.  
My country is here. I am foal and violet. Hawthorn  
breaks from my hands.  
("Taliesin in Gower")

This pin, this point over and under the Bristol Channel's  
wailing,  
Piercing the sky carried in the breast, flung to the  
maniac grin...  
("Spoils of War")

Watkins often creates a metrical pattern which uses lines of  
different metrical length within the same stanza. In the following poem,  
for example, each stanza consists of one line of trimeter, two of penta- 
meter, and one of tetrameter:

Do not look back. The track  
Of vertical terror's questing shadow runs  
Figure to figure, vainly seeking one  
Dropped here in marble from the sun.  
("The Age-Changers")

He often concludes a stanza with a shortened final line. This device,  
which tends to give the stanza a clipped quality, can be very effective,  
particularly when the short line contains the heart of the stanza:

Even such a curious taste  
I found, seeing Winter blow  
Above a leafless waste  
The bitter sloe.  
.........  
A flavour tart and late  
Which, when the rest had gone,  
Could hide in mist and wait,  
Its root in stone.  
("The Sloe")

But Watkins also makes frequent use of a lengthened last line, a device  
which creates the effect of a dying away or of an amen.  

For time's old beat  
Must change to music when  
Fly to His steadfast feet
The souls of men,
And lightning play on every winding-sheet.
("For a Christening")

Often Watkins chooses regular metrical patterns which might, in less capable hands, result in a sing-song or monotonous effect:

Shine above me, cool this fever;
Lift to you the newborn eyes.
Set your bow against their quiver
That in darkness they discover
Eyes of love, unsetting eyes.
("Words to Artemis")

The cloud-backed heron will not move:
He stares into the stream.
He stands unfaltering while the gulls
And oyster catchers scream.
He does not hear, he cannot see
The great white horses of the sea,
But fixes eyes on stillness
Below their flying team.
("The Heron")

It is interesting to note that Watkins, in the above example, breaks the alternated iambic tetrameter and trimeter pattern of the first four lines with a rhyming couplet before the pattern has become at all tiresome. The definite pause which occurs rhythmically between the seventh and eighth lines is another factor in producing variety within the stanza.

The same problem of avoiding too great a regularity of meter is seen in the last stanza of "Hunt's Bay":

Touch you may and touch you can,
White and strange, the drifting wood,
But never touch the severed man
Torn from history for good,
Nailing to splints and spars
Night, and the turning stars.

The first four lines, despite the complexity of their meaning, have something of the simple, regular meter of a nursery rhyme. But the last two lines create a very different effect. Not only are these final lines in
trimeter rather than in the tetrameter of the first four lines, but the very words used require a different vocal expression. Indeed, the phrase, "splints and spars," is impossible to pronounce without giving each word accent and separation. The effect of this phrase, coupled with the heavily accented Nailing and Night, and reinforced by alliteration, is to give these final lines a forceful intensity entirely in keeping with their position and importance in the poem.

With the above example, attention has shifted from a consideration of Watkins' use of metrical patterns to his use of rhythm as the actual instance within the line. In this sense rhythm may serve not only to give variety to the established meter, but to give added significance to meaning as well. This effect may be noted in considering the first line of the following stanza:

Go, death, give ground, for none of yours is here.  
Weep with no sound, figures around a well.  
Here gales knock down the chestnuts year on year,  
And block with leaves the entry to the temple.  
("Call It All Names, but Do Not Call It Rest")

That the metrical pattern of this poem is iambic pentameter is most clearly observable in the fourth line. If the first line, then, were to be scanned in this pattern with no thought of sense or propriety, the result would be: "Go, death, give ground, for none of yours is here." But if both the proper meter and the inherent meaning are noted, a more complex situation arises; and indeed, we must begin to think more deeply about the meaning itself. Of the first four words, then, which should receive stress? Obviously, the most vital word or words should be accented. The imperative Go must certainly receive emphasis, as must the object of the command, death. But when we consider the phrase, give ground, we must look at the
meaning of the entire poem in order to assign proper stress. Because the poem has as its major theme the inability of death to maintain its hold on those it claims, the demand of the speaker for death to "give ground" is the key to the significance of the whole. Meaning and meter, therefore, indicate that all four beginning words should receive stress, with this rhythmic pattern as the result: "Go, death, give ground, for none of yours is here." It is notable, too, that Watkins, after establishing these initial spondees, returns to normal iambic pattern for the remainder of the line.

Watkins' frequent use of spondees in conjunction with enjambment is often an important element in giving his rhythmical patterns strength as well as variety:

Swear by no god, Call not
Youth hot, aged cold, Be as the Carthagins
Alert. The sea is theirs; and through their lids
Light breaks. Their fingers feel the tides.
("The Age-Changers")

The use of spondees also occurs in what is a distinctive metrical form of Watkins': a quatrain consisting of three lines of tetrameter, each centered with a pause, and a final two-foot line. This form appears in a number of different poems:

Stunned in the stone light, laid among the lilies,
Still in the green wave, graven in the reed-bed,
Lip-read by clouds in the language of the shallows,
Lie there, reflected.
("Ophelia")
Great nights returning, midnight's constellations
Gather from groundfrost that unnatural brilliance.
Night now transfigures, walking in the starred ways,
Tears for the living.

("Great Nights Returning")

Light is a great pool. Look, the clouds are flying.
Of all forms living, man alone deliberate

Scrawls on a leaf the impression of his going.

These leaves are numbered.

("Thames Forest")

Such spondees as stone light, reed-bed, Great nights, groundfrost, and great pool serve to create several effects. First, they emphasize and mark out the rhythmic patterns within the line. Second, they serve to slow down, to make deliberate, a metrical pattern which might have become monotonous. Finally, they serve to bring these phrases to prominence in terms of meaning.

Ideally, then, meter imparts to a poem a feeling of steadiness, of wholeness, and of unity; rhythm gives it variety, individual beauty, and poetic meaning. When these unite with other facets of creative skill and are coupled with deeply felt ideas, the result is Watkins at his finest:

Ruffled with radiance now the black silk wings
Float out, and from this verge
I see them drop, then merge
Wind's desolation, broken things,
With secret life concealed in mottled shells.
I in predicament match them, nothing else.
How could they know as I must know,
These hazards they must overcome
Of whirlwind, thunderstorm and foam,
Are nothing but the shells from which they grow?

("Ode at the Spring Equinox")
ii. Diction

If meter serves as the loom of poetry, diction or word choice must serve as the yarn or raw material. For all fine poets, as John Press has said, "...have known that the proper exercise of their art lies in the mastery of language, in their ability to express the subllest concepts, the most evanescent moods, the minutest fluctuation of feeling by controlling the pace, the colour, the timbre, and the rhythms of their chosen words." Thomas Blackburn suggests that a poet's proper use of diction is at least partly "the ability to distinguish between commonplace words which rise glibly to the tongue, and those which rise from a deeper level, which catch the stirrings of those depths." And Karl Shapiro has warned that "unless the poet can argue through language colors, language shapes, language sounds, and through the natural image-making genius of language, he fails as a poet." The poet's diction, then, is more than his choice of the suitable or beautiful or rhyming word. Indeed, "the poet's search for a certain word or phrase is a search for the exact degree of change which he has lived and is now part of him." That Vernon Watkins is deeply concerned with the question of diction in all its aspects of sound, meaning, and connotation is shown in excerpts from the letters sent to him by Dylan Thomas. (Watkins' 

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15. Ibid., p. 41.
letters to Thomas were unfortunately lost.)

October 25, 1937: "Perhaps I never mentioned it, but from the beginning, from the first time I saw the poem ["Mana"] shaping, I've felt the line (first) to be wrong, disliked "Fabled"—not because it is used as a verb, but because of its position...And one other line I think is bad: "Laid in the long grey shadow of our weeping thought." This, to me, has far too many weak words. They are weak alone, and weaker when added together. They do not cancel each other out, though, but elongate a thin nothing: a long, grey, weeping sausage.16

March 21, 1938: "All the words are lovely, ["Call It All Names, but Do Not Call It Rest"] but they seem so chosen, not struck out. I can see the sensitive picking of words, but none of the strong, inevitable pulling that makes a poem an event...[it is] so obviously written in words....

'Was That A Grief' has a lot more vulgarity in it, breaches of the nostalgic etiquette. There are, too, I think, stalenesses: 'a later threnody,' 'in the years to be'; awkwardnesses: 'Next from blood's side, with poppy's nonchalance'; weaknesses: 'Their fingers frail as tendrils of light's flower.' Stale, because the words come, not quite without thinking, but without fresh imagining: down they go, the germ of what you want and what is yours ready-folded in a phrase not yours and that you don't need. The awkwardness of "poppy's nonchalance" is obvious: it sounds like a man with a lisp and a stutter trying to gargle. And weak, because that particular alliterative line is too easily-taken....

April 1, 1938: "In one thing you are still wrong: 'poppy's nonchalance' is bad; it cannot be anything but bad; and I refute your criticism from the bottom of my catarrh."18

Watkins' criticisms of Thomas were sometimes rejected, but at other times were accepted gratefully, as when Thomas wrote, "Your criticism's always terribly suggestive, and in that particular 'death line,' you showed quite clearly to me the one big misbalance in the poem."19

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16Letters, pp. 28-29.
18Ibid., pp. 40-41.
19Ibid., p. 82.
When Watkins' diction is studied from the standpoints of sound, meaning, and even its appearance on the page, certain elements strike the eye at once. First, the reader is sure to notice the wide range of Watkins' vocabulary. This is not to say that he uses erudite, foreign, or technical language, but rather that he has at his fingertips a wealth of English words and synonyms. There is no doubt that the poet is an educated man. His poetry bristles with multisyllabled words, some of which would not ordinarily be thought of as material for poetry. Yet all are grist for his mill, in the old phrase. The stately "Ode," for example, contains such formal and dignified words as acknowledge, ignorant, eloquent, covetous, tyrannous, betrayal, procession, caparisoned, historic, heraldic, and preservation. None of these words would particularly catch the attention if used singly; it is the piling up of such terms in one rather short poem which gives it its striking quality.

What that quality is may best be noted in the following stanza, with its formal and dispassionate description of warfare:

    So, when these islands faced a tyrannous power,
    Death approached in the air; towns, churches, fell;
    Seas rendered up their victims;
    Noble and innocent souls were martyred.

("Ode")

The "Ode" is skillfully created poetry--intellectual, precise, and suitable for its subject: the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. But it seems cold, almost forbidding, with little emotional appeal.

This cool, unemotional tone which is a definite part of Watkins' total style often seems to stem from his practice of using an abstract word or phrase in the midst of otherwise vivid and concrete lines. A few examples will illustrate something of this quality: "Our mortal life
is composite..." ("Good Friday"); "Mathematical, yet inscrutable..." ("Poet and Goldsmith"); "No absolute remains to bind them fast" ("Forge of the Solstice"); "Here the heirs of the heavens were disposed in symmetrical orders/ And a flash of perception transfigured the darkness of years" ("Swedenborg's Skull"); "You bring the authentic years..." ("Demands of the Poet"); 'The generations rise/ To seek their destinies...", "All the potential of time...", " and "The reticent forces of rhyme..." ("Revisited Waters"). As Winifred Nowotny reminds us, "A vocabulary no matter how extensive can do nothing of itself to communicate the particularity and concretion of living experience." The use of such abstract words tends, then, to create a withdrawal, a reserve on the part of the poet, which weakens the force of certain poems.

Watkins also makes frequent use of formal openings in a number of his poems: "It is fitting..." ("Grievances of the Sea"); "Let hands be about him white..." ("Mother and Child"); "I speak of an exacting ghost..." ("An Exacting Ghost"); "I sing of..." ("The Good Samaritan"); "Poet, of godlike stillness..." ("To Hölderlin"); "It is always so..." ("Returning from Harvest"). These, too, add to the formal, intellectual, unemotional quality.

Happily, the tone of cool, withdrawn intellect at work is not the only one found in Watkins' poetry. Often he employs his extensive vocabulary with an emotional excitement which transfigures the words:

Great nights returning, midnight's constellations
Gather from groundfrost that unnatural brilliance.
Night now transfigures, walking in the starred ways,
Tears for the living.

("Great Nights Returning")

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Night with her teeming brood
Unites the faculties
To polarize the blood
Moving, yet fixed and still,
Drawn to her secret North.
The same unerring will
That called conception forth.
Now bids the bloodstream freeze.

("Bread and the Stars")

There is nothing cold or abstract about Watkins' word choice in this example:

Erinna, serene in sunlight, lay on the rock,
The young sea touched her, the gay, the nimble betrayer.

("Erinna and the Waters")

Nor is there any touch of the withdrawn in this celebration of earthly love:

Dive, sun, through my hand,
And pull the waters after;
Spin the whirling land
In a silkworm's darkness, softer
Than light, a luminous net,
That we, with meteors' arms
Far under the coverlet
May wind the winds and storms.

("A Lover's Words")

If Watkins' word choice may sometimes include a formidable number of abstract, intellectual terms, at other times it may be characterized by simplicity:

Never has she lost a note
Of the music taught her
Since the hour when Arthur's boat
Moved upon the water.

("Camelot")

O, I am green and fair;
Is there a fairer tree?
Who is it underneath
Sleeps the sleep of death?
There is no answer there.
There is no answer there.

("Sycamore")
Watkins is capable of setting forth the beauty of nature in words which seem in themselves to evoke the effect of the scene:

Winter is sparkling. Looms
Wake from the freezing North
The crying snow of lambs
Suffered and shaken forth.

Crisp windows in their vice
Grip the white sheaves that show
The whispering ferns of ice
And crystal world of snow.

("The Mask of Winter")

Books are like water. Silver, laughing river...

Wave on wave breaking, endless enchantment,
Thunder of sea-spray, the constant horizon.
O ring of life, O Earth unchanging,
Song, the newborn one...

("A Book from Venice")

Sailing with clouds and woods behind,
Pausing in leisured flight,
He stepped, alighting on a stone,
Dropped from the stars of night...

("The Heron")

Bright petal, dragonfoil, springing from the hot grass,
Dazzling profusion continually fading,
Sprung from the white fire, tiger-lily snake-fang
Basking in brilliance; deep in fume of poppies
Sleep the black stamens.

("Music of Colours--Dragonfoil and the Furnace of Colours")

In some of his most powerful poetry, Watkins employs words which not only describe, but seem actually to recreate, the mental condition which they present. This is most clearly seen in "The Strangled Prayer," in which the poet's struggle between the earthly and the spiritual is shown by the progressively choked language:

Mars is red
With violent fury, glowing with vine-must.
The crested darkness hovering overhead
Has eyes of serpents. My great prayer is crossed
By all the travelling beasts. My proud loins lust.
Snatch up, untwist me, twelve-tongued Pentecost,
For Nature makes me mortal in her bed.
Watkins also knows the value of repetition. In the following stanza, for example, the repeated white becomes almost physically dazzling:

White blossom, white; white shell; the Nazarene
Walking in the ear; white touched by souls
Who know the music by which white is seen,
Blinding white, from strings and aureoles,
Until that is not white, seen at the two poles,
Nor white the Scythian hills, nor Marlowe's queen.
("Music of Colours--White Blossom")

Or repetition may produce a stolid quality, as in these appropriately weighty lines:

His eyes are closed. They are closed. His eyes are closed.
His hands are clenched. They are clenched. His hands are clenched.
The messenger comes. The letters are disciplined; they are disposed.
The black light quivers. Earth on Earth is avenged.
("The Mummy")

Watkins' diction, then is generally characterized by vividness, richnes, and conciseness. If abstract words occasionally weaken the vigor of a poem, more often an exactly suitable word gives added strength and meaning to poetry which always indicates the careful craftsmanship of its maker.

iii. Syntax and Stanza

Winifred Nowottny has noted that although single words "bring to the poem a potential of power which derives from their usage outside the poem, ... the power is not set to work until it combines or collides with other potentials brought into the poem by the other words it also uses."21 Thus the study of a poet's diction must broaden into a study of his syntax, or arrangement of words into sentences.

21The Language Poets Use, p. 46.
Watkins makes use of many types of sentence structure, never permitting any one pattern to become monotonous. Often his sentences are straightforward, in normal syntactical order:

The mare lies down in the grass where the neat of the skylark is hidden.
Her eyes drink the delicate horizon moving behind the song.

("The Mare")

But he also employs inverted sentences effectively:

By cypress taught and yew,
My soul I made
Write old ambition new,
And qualify the laurel's shade.

("Three Harps")

Art is the principle of all creation,
And there the desert is, where art is not.

("Demands of the Poet")

Watkins makes use of very short and of very long sentences:

Light is a great pool. Look, the clouds are flying.

("Thames Forest")

Let hands be about him white, O his mother's first,
Who caught him, fallen from light through nine months haste
Of darkness, hid in the worshipping womb, the chaste
Thought of the creature with its certain thirst.

("Mother and Child")

And some of his most impressive sentences encompass the entire stanza:

All things he spared, except his rod, and words;
The beggars knew his house, but not the birds;
For once his careless housemaid dropped a crumb,
False augury of barren years to come.

("The Miser")

Vertical rains,
Fall, to deliver
From sterile chains
The abounding river,
Prophetic, blind,
A Titan, born,
Losing to find
His wine, his corn.

("The Spring")
The elliptical sentence structure found in the above stanza is another syntactical means of which Watkins makes good use:

Who could devise
But the dark sea this thing
...........
Whose colour cries:
'I am of water, as of air the wing'....
("The Shell")

The winds are mad about this time,
Mad the storm's outrageous drum,
Man himself a witless mime
Because the equinoctials come....
("Hunt's Bay")

Occasionally, Watkins' sentences have an old-fashioned, almost archaic sound:

In crowded tavern you I found
Conversing there, yet knew you dead.
("The Exacting Ghost")

Now from that neighbour state
One who all war did hate
Came as a witness back....
("The Return")

And he sometimes creates sentences which have the flavor of the King James' Bible:

By this were many gathered near the tomb-mouth with much weeping.
Then did the fountain stop. That moment, Jesus wept.
...........
For the young man came forth, and it was he they knew;
And they drew back amazed; it shook their hearts
with fear
To see the young man walk.
("Cantata for the Waking of Lazarus")

But on rare occasions, Watkins' sentences are witty and biting:

Ptolemy's planets, playing fast and loose,
Foretell the wisdom of Copernicus.
...........
The shroud-lamp catches. Lips are smiling there.
'Les flammes--déjà?'--The world dies, or Voltaire.
("Discoveries")
Complain against the dead, but do not sue.
They never read you, much less injured you.
("Affinities")

Watkins effectively uses repetition to create pattern in sentence structure:

For the sea turns whose every drop is counted
And the sand turns whose every grain a holy hour-glass holds
And the weeds turn beneath the sea, the sifted life slips free,
And the wave turns surrendering from its folds
All things that are not sea, and thrown off is the spirit
By the sea, the riderless horse which they once mounted.
("Griefs of the Sea")

And he employs enjambment to bring a desired word or phrase into syntactical, as well as rhythmical, prominence:

Yet the turf tells me: she it is, no other,
Touches the rose-blaze, gathers what became her
Music. Forgetfulness holds her like a girdle
Silent. Only by absence is the song made
Audible. Orpheus, leaning above Lethe,
Knows every note there.
("Music of Colours--Dragonfoil and the Furnace of Colours:")

An occasional sentence is awkward. For instance, the juxtaposition of crowned/Throned in the following lines creates a bumpy effect:

God's true fear, the rebuke of power, attended
Her the trumpets proclaimed and the moment crowned
Throned by the Thames...
("Ode")

And the line, "The red spark eating the black bark" ("Fire in the Snow"), though colorful in its imagery, seems impossible to pronounce with any grace. Occasionally, too, a sentence is weak, tapering off into what Dylan Thomas called "a long, grey sausage." An example of this type appears in "The Feather": "Now if the words they lost I speak,/ it must be to that harp...."

Whether simple or ornate, vivid or stately, Watkins' sentences

\[\text{Letters, pp. 28-29.}\]
are seldom conversational or idiomatic; and the reader may find himself yearning for a little "unpoetic" language. It is thus with a sense of encountering something refreshing that we find in Watkins' poems occasional lines which capture the informal, conversational tone of men in daily life. And American readers may perhaps be forgiven if they note a slight resemblance to Robert Frost's famous style in these lines of Watkins':

If I open my eyes I see this musician-turned ploughman slow,
Plainly follow his tractor vibrating beneath blue sky,
Or cast his sickle wide, or reach full-length with the hoe,
Or blame the weather that set its blight on a crop or a plan
To mend his roof, or cut back trees where convolvulus ran,
Or attend to as many needs as the holes in a watering-can:
He would wait for the better weather; it had been a wet July.

("A Man with a Field")

This my birthplace? No, friend, this is Xanion's,
He, the owner of that yellow barley.
Mischievous chicory was all I planted:
Blue-eyed, we played here.

("Loiterers")

Nature needs waste; even friendship needs a gap.
Wines love delay and boats a measured stroke.

("The Interval")

It is good-bye
To all things not beinning, and I must try
Making the driftwood catch,
To coax, where the cry fades, fires which cannot fall.

("The Snow Curlew")

Watkins' sentences indicate again the care with which he functions as a craftsman. Rarely obscure or extremely complicated in syntax, they present their meaning in a thoughtfully prepared manner. The few poems which have the conversational idiom show that Watkins is quite capable of using this tone if he chooses. That he chooses most often to use formal, carefully patterned sentences is a decision which his readers
can respect, remembering that Watkins has said, "Natural speech may be excellent, but who will remember it unless it is allied to something artificial, to a particular order of music?" 23

In the construction of stanzas, Watkins is generally conservative, achieving variety within the stanza by his use of such devices as the very short line, the very long line, the shortened or lengthened final line, the combination within one stanza of lines of different metrical length, and, of course, by his use of all the elements of diction, imagery, and rhyme. The stanzas themselves may run from two to more than twenty lines. Only occasionally does Watkins create an unusual stanza arrangement of the kind used in "Woodpecker and Lyre-Bird":

On gorse displaying that greenish
Glittering enamelled plumage,
Startled, he skimmed rock, leaving
A stone-grey socket of light.
He had seen me, sudden to vanish,
Gone, bequeathing an image
Of weighted brilliance, achieving
In loops its ponderous flight.

And he is never interested in presenting his ideas in stanzas shaped like urns, crosses, or chalices; for such a stringent arrangement must, no matter how skillfully the poet works, place him to some extent in the hands of his pattern. Form, to Watkins, is to be achieved as Michelangelo created his statue of Adam:

Design upon this image holds the vast
Will of the sculptor no desire could speak.
There the strict outline overcame the weak
Before the face could hold the radiance cast
And let that finger gather all the Past,
Revealing at a stroke in light oblique
In muscular strength of neck and curve of cheek
The harmony of line for which all fast.
("Angelo's Adam")

In his attempt to create "the form/Speaking against the false forms it cast out" ("Angelo's Adam"), Watkins finds a traditional stanza pattern the most appropriate vessel.

iv. Rhyme Schemes and Sound Patterns

Rhyme, though it is to many readers the most distinctively poetic of all the elements of form, is a feature which the poet may choose to employ or to omit. Watkins' choice is most often to use rhyme; but he also has a number of unrhymed poems. These verses are often neither exactly blank verse nor free verse, but are, rather, metrically patterned, unrhymed poems:

Truth is simple: out of the mouth of babes
Flows the living word to correct the proud.
All great acts are serene and
Born in the bands of acknowledged glory.
("Ode")

Books are like water. Silver, laughing river
From Venice, making light play after two hundred years;
Yes, here are Dante and Guido, the companions,
Fountain ascending.

("A Book from Venice")

Watkins' preference for rhyme, however, may stem from the ease with which he seems to find a suitable rhyme for the most difficult words--a facility that is probably the result of his extensive vocabulary and of his scrupulous craftsmanship. Yet there is rarely in his poetry a sense of syntax or idea being manipulated or distorted in order to create rhyme. Rhymes seem, rather, to occur naturally--even inevitably--in many different patterns.

Within the simple quatrain, Watkins uses many different rhyming patterns:
I cannot count the times we met.
You clasped me near the field of hay.
I stood when Orpah would not stay.
Now death has brought us closer yet.
("Ruth's Lament for Naomi")

I speak of an exacting ghost,
And if the world distrust my theme
I answer: This that moved me most
Was first a vision, then a dream.
("The Exacting Ghost")

After the winter solstice came
Ice and low flame,
The cockerel step by which the light
Shortened the sleep of earth and night.
("Good Friday")

In his sonnets, Watkins generally rhymes the octave
according to one of the established patterns, but uses all manner of
rhyme schemes in the sestets. Thus, one sestet is rhymed ababcc, an­
other is rhymed ababba, and still others are rhymed ababab, abacch, and
abacbc.

Watkins' facility with rhyme stands him in good stead when he
works with the intricate terza-rima pattern:

Kestrel, king of small hawks, moreover
Keenest of sight, blind wings you shake,
Pinned on the sky, and quivering, hover

High over prey. A gloom you make
Hang from one point in changing time
On grass. Below you seawaves break

Rebellious, casting rhyme on rhyme
Vainly against the craggy world
From whose black death the ravens climb.
("The Kestrel")

The same facility enables Watkins to create and to carry through ten
stanzas a complicated nine-line pattern:

There is a moment when Apollo's tree
Is Daphne still. The Past is not the Past
But wound within a ring
So finely wrought,
It knows each path and avenue of thought.
Downward he looks, through heaven and earth, to see
The sunlight and dayspring
Caught in her eyes, all uttered love surpassed
By that first heaven which knows her timelessly.
("The Turning of the Stars")

Not until the fifth line do we begin to become aware that the poem is rhymed in an intricate pattern of abcddacba, the first three lines and their inverted rhyming lines at the end providing a frame for the entire stanza.

Though Watkins often chooses to use exact rhymes, the fact that his rhyming almost never seems mechanical is due in good part to his mastery of near-rhymes—what Louis Untermeyer calls "the unexploited resources in the matching of tones." T. Walter Herbert has suggested three advantages of near-rhyme: first, it gives coherence and echo without "jingle"; second, it is unobtrusive, concealing its art; and third, it does not force the poet to alter meaning in order to achieve perfect rhyme. The poet who uses near-rhyme, therefore, can retain all the advantages of rhyme, but with the added quality of subtlety.

Watkins occasionally uses homophones as near-rhymes:

   When I was born on Amman hill
   A dark bird crossed the sun.
   Sharp on the floor the shadow fell;
   I was the youngest son.
   ("The Collier")

Or he may use rhymes which have the same sound, but which do not fall on the same syllable:


25 "Near Rimes and Paraphones," Sewanee Review, XLV, iv (1937), p. 440. For a complete listing of various types of near-rhyme, see this article.
Where great sails fling
Black Hawk-wings to the crest
Lust of the Viking
Swoops with a bird's unrest.

("After Sunset")

But near-rhyme as it is usually thought of appears more clearly in this stanza:

Yet the shell knows
Only its own dark chamber
Coiled in repose
Where without number
One by one goes
Each blind wave, feeling mother-of-pearl
and amber,
Flooding, to close
A book all men might clasp, yet none remember.

("The Shell")

In "The Strangled Prayer" occur near-rhymes which not only are near to each other--ancestors, stirs, stars--but are close to the exactly rhyming words--prayer, air; stairs, and hair.

Look down at midnight when my strangled prayer
Calls through night-leaves the shades of ancestors,
Midsummer night, Eden of windless air,
Coiled with strange creepers where the moth-wing stirs.
Conscience fights echoes, footprints on worn stairs,
And my ten fingers separate the stars.
Bless my strained heels. I drown in a child's hair.

The above verse also illustrates Watkins' ability to make use of alliteration--strangled, strange, stirs, stairs, stars, strained;
assonance--leaves, Eden, Creepers, heels; and internal rhyme--night and fights.

Certain lines will emphasize one or the other of these sound patterns. Thus, alliteration is prominent in the line, "We watched you, doomed, drowned, daggered, hurled from sight..." ("Elegy on the Heroine of Childhood"); assonance is seen in these: "Lichens may thrive where once my sculptor's eyes/ Weaned the sweet changeling..." ("The Fountain");
and internal rhyme in these: "To reconcile what death divides/ And knock the breath out of the sea" ("Expectation of Life"). But almost any stanza may contain all of these sound patterns, as well as rhyme or near-rhyme:

Sink in the well of dust.
Ah think: the skeletons of leaves have rest.
A mad sea rages through the bud encased.
The blind winds whirl; that whirlpool trust.
("The Age-Changers")

Erinna, serene in sunlight, lay on the rock.
The young sea touched her, the gay, the nimble betrayer.
On Earth unrivalled in song, this low flute-player
Could entice, make music and pictures, menace, and mock.
("Erinna and the Waters")

A number of Watkins' poems, rhymed and unrhymed, make use of the feminine ending:

Years are divine rings: moments are immortal.
The months are saplings, centuries are oakenshaws.
Lightfoot the soul goes. Impressive is the shadow
Cast by those time-groves.
("Thames Forest")

No drop, though round, through that white miracle
Will sink, to be your oracle.
("The Turning of the Leaves")

Sometimes the vulture sees his carrion
A speck on Ganges. White on Himalay
The snows ascend above the light of dawn.
Though distance calls us like a clarion,
How ancient is the voice our souls obey.
("The Immortal in Nature")

What, then, do these elements of rhyme and sound patterns accomplish in the poetry of Watkins? Most obviously, they provide both unity and beauty of sound and even of appearance on the printed page. But they are never extraneous to the poem itself; rather, they are an integral part of the very life of the poem, so that without them there would be,
not the bare frame or skeleton of the poem, but no poem at all.

v. Imagery

Probably it is in his use of imagery that the poet reaches the heights of his poetic skill. Of the vital role of imagery, Thomas Blackburn has written:

The poetic image acts as a bridge between this inner world of man's inner self and that of our external environment, and through it some unrealized truth about ourselves is able to shoulder up from its shadowy hinterland into our waking consciousness. It is this intrusion into the well-lit, orderly circle of our daily awareness of some new statement from the unlit depths of ourselves, which can make the images of poetry and myth disturbing and at times frightening.²⁶

Less mystical comments about imagery emphasize its use in the poet's actual language. Karl Shapiro, for instance, insists that the image-making ability in the poet is not so much creative as it is the desire to get it right, to say the thing accurately. "A good image is a good picture, a proper likeness, a physical truth, and a symbolic truth," he adds.²⁷ Nathan A. Scott points out that imagery can help the poet to dramatize, rather than merely render, his poem, and thus to make it concrete and physically immediate.²⁸ Imagery is also a factor in vastly extending the language at the poet's disposal, Winifred Nowottny explains; for the poet by his use of imagery can be freed from the necessity of using names or terms already established, and possibly

²⁶The Price of an Eye, p. 16.
²⁷Beyond Criticism, pp. 34-35.
time-worn, in everyday language. And he may easily move from the terminology of one word—death, for example—to that of another such as winter. Further, the poet's use of imagery can enable him to avoid the complicated syntax necessary in order to present difficult ideas in unmetaphorical terms.

But what images will the modern poet use or create? Robert F. Knoll has said:

For several reasons the modern poet draws on new modern areas of experience for imagery. First, he and his audience have no other common experience. The Bible, the classic myths, European history itself, with which educated men of other centuries were acquainted, become esoteric. Moreover, the pleasant old imagery of moonlight and roses frequently seems banal...shopworn from too frequent handling. Or perhaps the contemporary pseudo-scientific mind makes us so aware of the carbon in the diamond and the skylark's desperate battle for survival that the old imagery of benevolent nature rings false....The poet can only turn to the rather unlovely world of his experience.

By this definition, Watkins appears not to be a modern poet at all. In the first place, it is to be doubted that his world of experience is at all "unlovely," centering as it does around his family, impressive natural surroundings, and a secure, though possibly hard-won, religious faith. This is not to say, of course, that Watkins is unaware of the "carbon in the diamond"; but rather, it is to point out that the "contemporary pseudo-scientific" attitude is not that which we associate with him. When we turn to Watkins' sources of imagery, we find that they are just those which Knoll has insisted are all but impossible for the modern poet.

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29 The Language Poets Use, p. 69.
30 Ibid., p. 67.
31 Ibid., p. 62.
That is, Watkins' images are concerned with the Bible and orthodox religious faith, classic myths, and above all with nature in many forms. Does Watkins, then, merely echo or restate poets of the past; or does he use imagery, though concerned with traditional subjects, in a way so fresh and individual as to create something of value in any age?

That Watkins is far from being merely derivative in his imagery can be seen even in those aspects of his poetry which adhere most closely to traditional sources. He makes frequent use, for example, of what D. S. Bland calls "the pictorial image." Commenting regretfully on the swing away from this type of image, Bland says, "Yet for myself, and, I imagine, for many other readers of poetry, a great deal of the delight to be had from it comes from its power to call up pictures; whereas in much modern poetry there is a lack of definition of this kind...." In creating such images, Watkins' eye for beauty unites with his gift with words to create truly impressive scenes:

Sailing with clouds and woods behind,
Pausing in leisured flight,
He stepped, alighting on a stone,
Dropped from the stars of night.
He stood there unconcerned with day,
Deaf to the tumult of the bay,
Watching a stone in water,
A fish's hidden light.
("The Heron")

All is entranced here, mazed amid the wheatfield
Mustardseed, chicory, sky of the cornflower
Deepening in sunlight, singing of the reapers,
Music of colours swaying in the light breeze,
Flame wind of poppies.
("Music of Colours--Dragonfoil and the Furnace of Colours")

You find through crystals white and wet
The buried breath of the violet,
And lost near sunken cairns of stone
Drone-suckled flowers that breed alone.
("The Fire in the Snow")

It must be noted, however, that in these poems images are never merely pictorial for Watkins, but rather serve as settings for and enlargements of ideas.

Watkins is also closely related to traditional poetry in his frequent use of mythical and Biblical imagery. There is a sense, of course, in which any use of these sources for imagery gives results which are derivative. Thus, when Watkins uses the images of Ajax and Pegasus to refer to the poet's pride in his own accomplishment, his feeling that he is capable by himself of reaching the heights of creation, the image is somewhat ready-made. But most often, Watkins will use a mythical image to aid in explaining, or to enlarge the meaning of, a complicated idea.

Thus, in "The Turning of the Stars," he writes:

There is a moment when Apollo's tree
Is Daphne still. The Past is not the Past
But wound within a ring
So finely wrought,
It knows each path and avenue of thought.

If modern readers are not apt to have the story of Apollo and Daphne at their fingertips, it is not difficult for them to check the source in a dictionary. And readers of Eliot and Pound are certainly accustomed to the necessity of checking obscure references!

Of more importance in Watkins are images from the Bible and from orthodox Christianity. Again, these images can be derivative or ready-made, though this is seldom the case in Watkins' verse. In the following examples, however, traditional Christian imagery seems to be given no new dimension or new facet of meaning:
Then at last man encountered himself, his Accuser and end. He saw his own Hell and the labouring lusts that destroy; And Jerusalem showed him the pastures where friend dies for friend, And the end of all labour is joy.

("Revisited Waters: Origins")

Seeing lives go by
Unlit, the Father chose
That His own Son should die
And his eyes close
On truth, "to make a new theology.

("For a Christening")

At its best, Watkins' religious verse uses its images with new vitality and vision. The sense of Christ's incarnation and of the Communion of believers with Him are, for instance, suggested in subtle and original imagery in "Bread and the Stars":

Yet men to Earth are bound,
To heats from which they grew.
They sift the stars who pound
The corn with leavening yeast
Till the whole bread is made;
And plenty crowns their feast,
Wine from a cellar's shade
Preserving all that's true.

Bread of dear life, and cup
Or glass made dull by breath,
Those spinning worlds far up
Whose fiery swarms recede,
All cannot match the weight
Of your immediate need,
Brought on a man-fired plate
To break his fast to death.

What truth has man but loaves?
Bread will compel man's trust,
And not the starry groves:
Wisdom is hid in crumbs.

Even in his use of images so stable as to have become symbols, using Philip Wheelwright's distinction, Watkins achieves striking origin-

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ality. In his metaphorical expression of the Cross, for instance, Watkins writes:

Not in the speculative skies
Instruction lies,
But in the nails of darkness driven
Into these hands which hold up heaven.
("Good Friday")

Watkins also uses "archetypal symbols," the meaning of which is roughly the same for all humanity, with skill and freshness. Among the most important of such symbols are blood, with its symbolic meaning of life, or, conversely, of loss of life, and water, with its dual symbolism of cleansing and sustaining. But Watkins gives these symbols fresh significance:

So Shades converse, and the world's dumb thud
Muffles their argument, Man more strong,
Gives, to console their frightened song,
The beat that consoles them most, his blood.
("The Sunbather")

The waterfall by falling is renewed
And still is falling.
All its countless changes
Accumulate to nothing but itself.
("The Replica")

A glance at some of the individual metaphorical devices used by Watkins enables us to appreciate the craftsmanship and originality of thought which have gone into his poetry.

The figure of synecdoche, in which the whole is implied by naming a part, appears in such phrases as "the finger of God" ("Yeats'
Tower"), "the ribs of the man" ("Three Harps"), and in an especially fine example from "A Wreath for Alun Lewis": "I mourn, on the edge of your world, the loss to our sailing/ of your wrists and honest eyes."

Metonomy, in which the object is implied by naming something connected or associated with it, appears in such phrases as "the noon-cracked pool" ("Fire in the Snow"), and "Touch, finger of Wine, this well of crystalline water..." ("Before a Birth").

Watkins occasionally uses the type of image which Christine Brooke-Rose calls an implied comparison. In images of this kind, a literal statement is intended to evoke a parallel in another part of the same statement. Thus, when Watkins speaks of "putting a dunce's cap upon a mound" ("Empty Hands") the mound is literally a grave, but the dunce's cap is metaphorical, referring to the tombstone, or possibly to flowers placed on the grave.

That almost any part of speech may be used metaphorically has been pointed out by Miss Brooke-Rose. She notes, for instance, a metaphorical difference between the use of the indefinite and definite articles. The indefinite article implies any "it" we care to conceive, something which has been imagined but not clearly visualized. Thus, when Watkins writes, "I drown in a child's hair" ("The Strangled Prayer"), the indefinite article gives a sense of universality. He drowns, metaphorically, in "childhood"—not in remembrance of any one child. The definite article, on the other hand, "claims our recognition, particularizes the image, suggests that the poet has become absorbed and isolated in his own vision, and relies on sufficient community of experience to enable the reader to familiarize it in his own mind; the danger is that

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if there is not sufficient community of experience, the image is unintelligible." On the simplest level, Watkins' phrase, "The cricket chirps Amen" ("The Strangled Prayer"), gives a sense of this being one room, a certain, live cricket, a real situation. The difficulties which can arise from the definite article in conjunction with a somewhat ambiguous phrase may be noted in Watkins' phrase, "I set my finger on the string/ That spins the ages round." ("The Feather")

The obscurity in the above phrase, however, stems more from the metaphorical use of the noun string to replace an idea never stated explicitly. Such a metaphor of "simple replacement" is assumed to be clear from either the context or the reader's intelligence. Indeed, the above-mentioned use of the string which spins the ages round becomes more comprehensible when the reader recalls Watkins' frequent use of the plummet as an image. The string thus implies not a mindless source behind nature, as one might first imagine, but the necessary passing of time, as the plummet falls through space. Other examples of simple replacement abound in Watkins' verse: "The dust is drinking wine" ("The Shooting of Werfel"); "The lamp I love is gone to ground" ("Buried Light"); and "There clenches the close fist through wreath and wraith..." ("The Dead Words"). In the "pointing formula," on the other hand, the proper term is mentioned, then replaced by the metaphorical term. Thus, in "A Book from Venice," Watkins first mentions Dante and Guido, then refers to the "plumage of two eagles." In "The Dead Shag," he notes

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38 Ibid., p. 24.
the birds' hectic flight when frightened, and then says, "A movement start
like a shot/ Each anchorite from its mark/ To safety out in the bay."

The copula, a statement that A is B, is so direct that it can be used for highly original metaphors, Miss Brooke-Rose points out. Included in the copula are such verbs as to seem, to call or be called, to signify, to be worth, and to become. Watkins uses this form in such lines as these: "The wound I suffer, the joy I am bearing, is he" ("The Good Samaritan"); "Light is a great pool" ("Thames Forest"); "The winged horse of myth seems now a circus horse" ("Prime Colours"); "...to be is the plummet falling through nature" ("A Wreath for Alun Lewis"); and "Cinders are priestlike in their tale of fire" ("The Dead Words").

A form of noun-metaphor that can be simple or extremely obscure is the genitive link. "The complexity of this type," says Miss Brooke-Rose, "is partly due to the fact that the same grammatical links (chiefly of...) are used to express many different relationships, even the identity of two linked terms..." The chief disadvantage of the genitive link is that if the metaphor is in any way unusual, it can collapse in its identifying role; and indeed, in modern poetry, the genitive link has come to be used for the juxtaposition of disparate terms. Watkins' use of this figure is generally clear and illuminating. When he speaks of the woodpecker's flying away as leaving: "a stone-grey socket of light" ("Woodpecker and Lyre-Bird"), we easily comprehend the meaning. "Manuscript of snow" ("The Snow Curlew") is a clear image of a fresh start,

40 Ibid., p. 24.

41 Ibid., p. 25.
an unwritten book of life. The somewhat curious image of "the net of waves" ("The Dead Shag") is clear enough if we recall that the speaker has caught a dead shag in his net at the beginning of the poem. But what is the significance of the phrase, "hooves of early singing" ("A Book from Venice")? And in which of the several possible senses are we to take the phrase "Love's moistening seal" in the sonnet, "The Dead Words"?

One especially interesting and often recurring noun metaphor in Watkins is seen in his use of the word harp. This image is employed in several different senses:

- Fire-fingers crawling through this last white page
  Have played such harps of bone...
  ("The Keen Shy Flame")

- Dead saints, white clouds, they stop not near the shrine
  But cross the skeleton harp, the unplucked bone...
  ("Yeats' Tower")

I set one grave apart,
Gave speech to stone:
'Come back to my sad heart
And play this harp of bone.'

Then at once the shrouded harp
Was manifest. I began
To touch, though pain is sharp,
The ribs of the man.
("Three Harps")

In the above instances, the harp seems to refer to the permanent in man—that which survives death. But earlier in "Three Harps," the harps symbolized ambition and inspiration:

Three harps: one
From emulation drew its strength
The rising sun:
A harp at arm's length.

The second word of day;
The second word:
A harp a hand away
Held by a human cord.
In still other examples, the harp is the source or support underlying all of life.

Yet that low harp whose strings dead fingers play
Tells instantly these joys are purchased by
Deaths in the dazzling sky
Too ancient and inscrutable to know.
("Niobe")

Even the stream's tongue alters where the rose-blaze
Hangs in forgetfulness. Who beneath the water
Plucks at the dark strings?
("Music of Colours--Dragonfoil and the Furnace of Colours")

The body it was torn from
Gave out a cry so shrill,
Sailors looked from their white road
To see what help was there.
It dragged the winds to a drop of blood
Falling through drowned air,
Dropping from the sea-hawk's beak,
From frenzied talons sharp;
Now if the words they lost I speak
It must be to that harp
Under the strange, light-headed sea
That bears a straw of the nest.
Unless I make that melody,
How can the dead have rest?
("The Feather")

Adjectives and adverbs can, of course, also be used metaphorically. Watkins uses adverbs in such metaphors as "Trance-wise the seeds break"; but more often uses a prepositional phrase with adverbial force, as in the line, "He cut through those rocks like a cordon" ("Woodpecker and Lyre-Bird"). His highly imaginative use of adjectives as metaphors is seen in these few of the many possible examples: "star-white bones"; "great-rooted calm"; "Enamelled plumage"; "Night was athletic"; "Time-killing bird"; and "Purgatorial years." Miss Brooke-Rose has pointed out a special sense in which adjectives may function as metaphors: "Some adjectives bring their own symbolic meaning, so that they hardly change
the noun into something else, but add the meaning... This is especially true of adjectives of colour, which 'replace' another adjectival idea...

In this connection, Watkins makes frequent use of the color white, a word which brings with itself connotations of purity, newness, beginning, and sometimes of blinding light, but which also may indicate death. Such various meanings can be noted in these lines:

White flowers die soonest, die into that chaste 
Bride-bed of the moon...
("Music of Colours--White Blossom")

If there is white, or has been white, it must have been 
When his eyes looked down and made the leper clean.
("Music of Colours--White Blossom")

The color green, with its connotations of freshness, rebirth and youth is also used by Watkins: "Green leaves are singing, white snows are gone..." ("Spring Song"); "Spring is the green, foretelling tree" ("The Tributary Seasons"). But green can also indicate age: "I have seen/
Loss bind him up with lichens: he grew green" ("Old Triton Time"); or in his description of a fountain:

But where green eyes look up,
Eyes that are blind with sun,
Uncertain fingers grope
Around the vine-leaved cup.
("From my Loitering")

It is interesting, too, to note how another adjective of color immediately gives the suggestion of childhood in the line, "Blue-eyed, we played here" ("Loiterers"). That the effect is not dependent on the word played is demonstrated by the fact that the idea of childhood remains, even if we change the phrase to read, "Blue-eyed, we died here."

\[42\]A Grammar of Metaphor, p. 245.
The change created by verb metaphors, Miss Brooke-Rose explains, is implicit rather than explicit.\textsuperscript{43} Thus when Watkins writes, "Ash ticks out faded hearths" ("The Snow Curlew"), ash is changed by implication into a clock, and the faded hearths become images of our mortal life. Other fine verb metaphors abound in Watkins' verse: "Where widowed silence, threaded like black lace,/ Held a dumb minute, stabs the dark like pins" ("The Dead Words"); "When smoke's white blooms have seeded from the bones..." ("Mana"); "Although no step was heard,/ It seemed a shadow stirred:/ My dark was manned" ("Time's deathbed"); and "Life withered back to water from a rock" ("The Room of Pity").

Watkins is even more skillful in creating extended images which develop the metaphorical comparison throughout a stanza or throughout the whole poem. In "Autumn Song," for instance, Watkins makes a court jester of the season:

\begin{quote}
Then will this Jack of green \\
With mouth of leaves, this mummer \\
Be no more seen, \\
Sunk with the Summer. \\

******* \\
His cap of light, his bells \\
Shall faded play \\
Among the broken shells \\
In disarray.
\end{quote}

"The Sloe" serves as an image of the feeling of greater closeness with the dead which comes with passing time:

\begin{quote}
How much more vivid now \\
Than when across your tomb \\
Sunlight projects a bough \\
In gradual gloom! \\

Even such a curious taste \\
I found, seeing Winter blow \\
Above a leafless waste \\
The bitter sloe.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{43}Ibid., p. 206.
It will not yet begin
To act upon the tongue
Till tooth has pierced the skin
And juice has sprung:

A flavour tart and late
Which, when the rest had gone,
Could hide in mist and wait,
Its roots in stone.

In "Trust Darkness," Watkins uses an extended image of gardening to illustrate the nature of the life of faith:

Trust darkness. Dig down
Through earth's crust to no crown.
The surface will moulder
But, tenacious, the root
When you are older
Bring blossom and fruit.

On the spade press your foot.
Dig up by the root
Whatever encumbers
Your thought in the grass.
There the seed slumbers,
Cold as dawn was.

"The Return" uses the imagery of a bombing raid to present the meeting, in a dream, of a living and a dead man:

Now from that neighbour state
One who all war did hate
Came as a witness back
From that night raid,
To make a truce, there in the very track
Where wings had made
A single engine stop, two hearts afraid.

It is our common speech
Comforts the ghost in each.
So, when that restless face
Returned last night,
It gave serenity to time and place,
Though beams of light
Cross and converged to pick out wings in flight.

"Swedenborg's Skull" is also remarkable for its curious imagery. Breaking into Swedenborg's tomb, the robbers find his skull, symbol of the sense
of value left after his death, conversing:

The mark of the pick is upon him, that rough intrusion
Upon the threshold and still place of his soul.
With courtesy he received them. They stopped,
astonished,
Where the senses had vanished, to see the dignified skull
Discoursing alone, entertaining those guests of his vision
Whose wit made the axe-edge dull.

Watkins is able to suggest, with vivid imagery, the struggle between
body and spirit:

Plumb on the floor I kneel. Stark moonlight now
Touches the skin and pricks desirous men;
They dance, they leap, they gratify the moon.
Bones make a circle round my naked moan.
Above this sheet the Pleiads and the Plough

Are white with ancient music. Mars is red
With violent fury, glowing with vine-must.
The crested darkness hovering overhead
Has eyes of serpents. My great prayer is crossed
By all the travelling beasts. My proud loins lust.
("The Strangled Prayer")

Watkins' ability to compress a great deal of meaning into a very
few lines is shown in his epitaph, "In Memory of Elizabeth Corbett
Yeats":

She drew his lightning to the needle's eye.
Now that the work is done, the last book bound,
The pains she took are quietly laid by,
The point in Earth's heart, lest a trumpet sound.

The first image makes clear the difference between the gifts of poet
and wife: he the lightning, she the guiding spirit who brought his genius
to its focus. In the metaphors of needlework is suggested the woman's
work as it appeared to herself. But her death is such a loss that, in
a sense, Earth itself must die, "lest a trumpet sound" in sorrow and in
appreciation.

Of Watkins' extended images, those connected with birds, and
especially with sea birds, are most interesting. George Woodcock has suggested that all poets are animists, at least in the sense that they reach spirit through concrete images. He also points out that the ancient Welsh religion appears to have contained animistic, almost totemistic, elements; for the Druids are said to have sought guidance from the birds. Thus Watkins is in an ancient tradition when he regards birds as spiritual symbols. Though he doubtless enjoys the physical beauty of the birds, it is seldom this aspect which he emphasizes. Rather, birds are to Watkins symbols of wisdom:

Why did the ancients fear them?
Wisdom belongs to the birds.
("Woodpecker and Lyre-Bird")

or of art:

Art holds in wiz'd the way the ravens build
Breeding, flying, and still the thread holds fast.
("Art and the Ravens")

Birds represent the calm in the midst of life's distractions:

Calamity about him cries,
But he has fixed his golden eyes
On water's crooked tablet,
On light's reflected word.
("The Heron")

The continuity of life is illustrated by the life of birds:

Unchanged through generations and renewed,
Perpetual child of its own solitude,
...........
Old though the cave is, this outlives the cave...
("The Curlew")

God's promise to man is symbolized in the lyre-bird:

The lyre-bird holds to man
The covenant caught in a leaf,
All space, all distance treasured
By the architectural wing.

"Dylan Thomas and the Welsh Environment," p. 300.
But the birds celebrated by Watkins do more than serve as images of beauty, continuity, and inspiration. For they also embody, and thus serve as images of, the daring, the courage, and the faith necessary for man or bird in a world where any moment may bring the seabird's fate:

The body it was torn from
Gave out a cry so shrill

It dragged the winds to a drop of blood
Falling through drowned air...

("The Feather")

Yet faith, as symbolized by the nest of the ravens, emerges strong:

And now three-quarters up the face
Of vertical rock they have perched upon a ledge.
Where, ragged as a bush or blackthorn hedge,
Their nest hangs, out of reach of wave.

Surely the constant that I seek,
Though every hope should break,
Is balanced, hoisted to that rock's
Dangerous height, the uplifted order
Safe from the track of murder,
The streaking, vanishing form of the red fox.

("Ode to the Spring Equinox")

In his imagery, then, as in the other facets of his poetic skill, Watkins shows himself a true craftsman, able to fuse the best of the past with the most permanently valuable of the present.

vi. Voice

T. S. Eliot has defined the three voices of poetry in the following manner:

The first is the voice of the poet talking to himself—or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary
character addressing another imaginary character.\(^{45}\)

Watkins makes least use of the third, or dramatic voice in his poetry. But he occasionally speaks in the voice of another person, as in the poems "I, Centurion" and "Ruth's Lament for Naomi," or in the voice of a natural object, as in "Sycamore." The playlet, "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd," might at first glance seem to belong most properly to the third voice; but its speakers, the living and the dead, so clearly give Watkins' beliefs concerning the two states that it can hardly be considered truly dramatic.

The second voice, as Eliot explains, is heard in all poetry that has a conscious social purpose, whether it be to amuse, instruct, tell a story, preach or point a moral, or provide satire.\(^{46}\) It is interesting to note that although Watkins writes from a religious standpoint, he only occasionally uses this second voice in a didactic sense:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I stoop to gather a seabird's feather} \\
\text{Fallen on the beach,} \\
\text{Torn from a beautiful drifting wing;} \\
\text{What can I learn or teach,} \\
\text{Running my finger through the comb} \\
\text{And along the horny quill?} \\
\text{("The Feather")} \\
\text{To praise where men most grieve,} \\
\text{To love where hate had been;} \\
\text{This I would wish on each;} \\
\text{No less the prophets teach.} \\
\text{("Revisited Waters")}
\end{align*}
\]

Watkins does, however, have a number of poems which use the second voice with the imperative mood, but in the tone of a man giving friendly advice.


\(^{46}\)Ibid., p. 24.
to another:

        Count up those books whose pages you have read  
    Moulded by water. Wasps this paper made.  
Come. You have taken tribute from the dead.  
Your tribute to the quick must now be paid.  
        ("Indolence")

When you are labouring, technically proud,  
Like Ajax, or that great Greek charioteer,  
Caught up in dazzle of your soul's career,  
Think of the child here drowned, the simple shroud...  
        ("Pegasus and the Child")

But to whom is Watkins really speaking in these poems? Because it seems likely that he is speaking as much to himself as to others, these poems most properly belong in the first voice or lyric category. In the descriptive poems, too, whether Watkins is writing of "Ophelia" or "The Heron" or "Swan Narcissus," his voice is still that of the poet talking "to himself--or to nobody." 47

        The great majority of Watkins' poems, then, are true lyrics. Often these lyrics contain direct reference to himself, through the use of the first person; and the consistent viewpoints shown in his verse give us no reason to believe that the first person spokesman is not Watkins. In a number of poems, the appearance of the spokesman comes near the end of the verse. Thus in "The Mummy," after five stanzas discussing the relation of time and death in regard to the preserved figure, come the lines:

        I lean down, crying: "Touch me, lay hold on my Spring,  
    Reach up, for I have loosened, tearing your skies,  
    Fountains of light, ages of listening!"

This pattern often recurs in Watkins. That is, first a setting is given--often a natural scene--and then the poet's thoughts, which have grown out

47Ibid., p. 22.
of the situation, are brought into the verse. Though this poetic pattern has been used by many writers before him, Watkins continues the tradition with great skill, bringing nature, time, and man together in a moving fashion. Perhaps "Spring Song," printed here in its entirety, best demonstrates this quality:

Green leaves are singing,
White snows are gone.
Sparkling, the water leaps
Over the stone, runs on:
Darkness holds my steps.

Scarecrow of to-morrow,
Knives turn the mould.
Where earth lies naked now
Clay can divine no sorrow
The winds have not made cold.

Across our silver morning
The swallows are returning;
The blue light of the sea
Already in the sky
Is knife-edged with their wings.

I saw them leaving,
Heard their chattering cries;
I fast and thirst,
Unsatisfied, believing
My Spring was first,

That filled my eyes,
Made my cheeks wet,
Walking with one who gave
Word from the grave,
A song no birds repeat.

T. S. Eliot has pointed out that a poet creating a poem in the lyric voice is "oppressed by a burden which he must bring to birth in order to obtain relief." Because this burden in a first-class poet will be that which is closest to his heart, its release will tend to bare his innermost soul. With many poets, this revelation is accom-

\[48\text{Ibid., p. 29.}\]
plished by a recalling of incidents from childhood—the age of freshness and simplicity so soon blighted and distorted by the cold hand of time. Watkins, however, deals with his youth in only a few poems, of which the most delightful is "Elegy on the Heroine of Childhood," written in memory of the silent-screen actress, Pearl White. Here he recreates the awed wonder of a small boy in the moving picture theater:

Dead exile, you would excite
In the red darkness; through the filtered light,
Our round, terrified eyes, when some
Demon of the rocks would come
And look you in his house of moving walls:
You taught us first, how loudly a pin falls.

How silently at last the reel runs back
Through your three hundred deaths, now Death wears black.

If Watkins tells us little about his childhood, he tells us a great deal about those persons who have been his friends or objects of his admiration. His feeling of sorrow at the loss of friends is revealed in "A Wreath for Alun Lewis" and in "A True Picture Restored: Memories of Dylan Thomas." His joy in the happiness of friends is shown in "Epithalamion for Michael Hamburger." And his respect for the great figures of art is indicated in poems addressed to Yeats, Swedenborg, Werfel, Nijinsky, T. S. Eliot, Heloise, Holderlin, Heinrich Heine, Wordsworth, Keats, and Browning. That these poems show as much about Watkins as they do about their subject can be seen in the "Ode" to T. S. Eliot:

Not by wide acclaim you tested accomplishment.
Early fame was deceit;
Failures nourished the honest,
Moulded still by a force unknown.

Rich in time's ambition, you yet chose penury,
Paying a timeless debt,
One intensity binding
Future ages and all the Past.
Next you pruned the English language of luxury
Lest it should waste its strength,
Matching strictness to music,
Incantation to living speech.

.........
This, then, most, your birthday justly will celebrate,
That the divining mind
Finds regenerate waters
Turning all to effects of grace.

Other poems in which Watkins reveals something of his personal
life are the prayers for his sons and daughter. In "The Precision of
the Wheel," for instance, he writes:

From this October night
May you be given
Peace, though the trees by blight
Or storms are riven.

.........
Child, what would I not give
To change for you
The world in which we live
And make it new.

But though this poem shows Watkins' personal feeling for his own son, it
also voices the prayer of parents everywhere. Thus it is not merely an
expression of intimate thoughts, but is universal.

The same personal, yet universal, quality is found in what are
probably the most important of Watkins' poems: those which present the
experience of the spirit in contact with God's creation. In these poems
Watkins raises the questions which have troubled men through the ages.

I mark how savagely the knife-wind blows,
Nailing me to the slope.
Out of this earth what hope
Rises with larks, or what repose
Lives on the sea or moves in seabirds' wings?
The wind starves all things and the seaspray stings
The dried-up grass. How can it serve
The lives of man?

("Ode at the Spring Equinox")
All these the eyelid buried,
These the rough earth hides,
Where are they, then?
("Angel and Man")

Unlike so many of us today, Watkins not only raises the questions, but finds the answers. Of the waterfall, he says,

We know it lives by being consumed, we know
Its voice is new and ancient, and its force
Flies from a single impulse that believes
Nothing is vain, though all is cast for sorrow.
There hangs the image of our life, there flies
The image of our transience.
("The Replica")

And the final answer to every question is religious faith:

All lives, to flourish, here should stop
Still; and all hope
To live, must die here first, and pull
New ages to this mountain skull.

Come, Easter, come: I was afraid
Your star had strayed.
It was behind our darkest fears
Which could not see their God for tears.
("Good Friday")

If we perhaps feel, despite the preponderance of his work in the lyric vein, that we do not know Watkins as well as we should, a number of causes may be responsible. His occasional withdrawal in terms of diction has been noted, as has the generally formal, rarely colloquial structure of his sentences. But perhaps a more significant reason is that Watkins is always so controlled, so disciplined, in his thought as in his art, that we miss some of the emotion which, as a human being, he presumably feels. If Watkins is ever furiously angry, or full of despair at life's injustices, or overcome with a realization of the absurdities of human existence, he never indicates it in his poetry. Because we sense, therefore, a certain lack of intimate human touch in Watkins' poetry as
a whole, our feeling for him is likely to be respectful admiration, not respectful affection.

vii. Obscurity

Still another possible cause for this sense of a barrier of reserve between poet and reader is that difficulty of communication which arises when the writer attempts to present complex and subtle ideas in poetic form. John Press has pointed out that our restless and insecure civilization has given rise to poetry that is often highly-wrought and difficult. Such a civilization has also given rise to theories of poetry which tend "to ignore or depreciate the importance of a poem's overt, paraphrasable meaning and a corresponding eagerness to emphasize the supreme value of the meaning which unfolds itself as the images and the cadences gradually flower in the light of the understanding."

Thomas Blackburn, for example, has suggested that it is inadvisable to attempt either paraphrase or critical analysis of certain of Watkins' poems. As he says, "What strikes one about some of the poetry of [George] Barker and Watkins, and a great deal of the work of Dylan Thomas, is that it does not lend itself to critical analysis." The reason for this quality of resisting analysis, Blackburn feels, is that many of the poems by these authors are incantations. As he explains:

These poets often use words to conjure up ghosts from those deeper levels of ourselves of which we are not fully conscious. Consequently it is, at times, not a question of their language having a specific reference to some situation of the external, or even of the subjective world, but of its ability to bring out of us into the light of day certain benighted energies of thought and feeling.

\[49\] The Chequer'd Shade, p. 164.

\[50\] The Price of an Eye, p. 114.
Because what matters, therefore, is the emotion which the poetry evokes, the criticism of such verse "should be more concerned with 'What I feel when I read these words' than 'What it is that the words are saying.'"\textsuperscript{51}

Blackburn illustrates his ideas with the last stanza of Watkins' poem, "The Feather":

Sheer from wide air to the wilderness
The victim fell and lay;
The starlike bone is fathomless,
Lost among wind and spray.
This lonely, isolated thing
Trembles amid their sound.
I set my finger on the string
That spins the ages round.
But let it sleep, let it sleep
Where shell and stone are cast;
Its ecstasy the Furies keep,
For nothing here is past.
The perfect into night must fly;
On this the winds agree.
How could a blind rock satisfy
The hungers of the sea?

This poem, Blackburn points out, has great incantatory power—the power of the charged word to conjure emotion from within us. That such a work would "crumble into banality under the critic's surgery" he suggests in his next comment:

Watkins' poem is about a feather which is torn from a seabird by a hawk and falls into the sea. The atmosphere of this poem, the mood which it summons out of us is precise enough. But God preserve it from a thoroughgoing pedagogic onslaught. The last two lines might yield easily enough; one could talk about the opposition between shifting, teeming, moon-pulled water, and the dead stasis of rock; but the Furies? Just what is the string to which the poet sets his fingers? No doubt something could be worked out, but I am doubtful if it would help either the poem or its readers.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{51}Ibid., pp. 114-115.

\textsuperscript{52}Ibid., pp. 115-116.
Though complete agreement with Blackburn's position might lead to mental laziness, it appears that at least one of Watkins' poems seems to function as an incantation—with the impossibility of clear-cut meaning—of the kind Blackburn describes. The poem, "Testimony," begins with the pronoun she, and does not, throughout its entire six stanzas, identify this female subject explicitly. I have asked a number of people well acquainted with modern poetry to read the poem, and then to identify she. Among the responses were these: the Sun, the Life Force, the Virgin Mary, Beauty, Myth, and Faith. Are we to conclude that one of these answers is right, the other five wrong? Or are they all aspects of the meaning in its widest sense? Perhaps the feeling we have while reading this poem is more important than exactness of definition.

However, neither "The Feather" nor "Testimony" has quite the difficulty readers of poetry have in mind when they complain of "obscurity." Rather, what they do have in mind is a certain ostensible chaos of imagery and sometimes of syntax and organization which makes it nearly impossible to follow a clear-cut, logical meaning throughout the poem. Such difficulty is not typical of Watkins' work as a whole, but arises in a few poems, particularly among those written early in his career.

In Watkins' poem "Portrait of a Friend," written after receiving in the mail a photograph of Dylan Thomas, he speaks of Thomas as one

Who for annunciation has
The white wings of the sheldrake,
Labouring water's praise,
The blind shriek of the mandrake,
Broken shells for story,
Torn earth for love's near head
Raised from time's estuary,
Fed by the raven's bread...
But a clue to this curious imagery is found in the last few lines of the poem:

The face of this cracked prophet,  
Which from its patient pall  
I slowly take,  
Drop the envelope,  
Compel his disturbing shape,  
And write these words on a wall  
Maybe for a third man's sake.

Noting that Watkins will "compel" the image of his friend, we can begin to understand that much of the previous strange imagery can be traced to the areas of black magic and witchcraft. Such a partial explanation does not, of course, explain all the shades of meaning involved. But as T. S. Eliot has said, if the reader thinks a poet is obscure, he should "remember that what he may have been trying to do, was to put something into words which could not be said in any other way, and therefore in a language which may be worth the trouble."53

Cleanth Brooks has explained:

...the poet must work by analogies, but the metaphors do not lie in the same plane or fit neatly edge to edge. There is a continual tilting of the planes; necessary overlappings, discrepancies, contradictions. Even the most direct and simple poet is forced into paradoxes far more often than we think...54

This overlapping and contradiction may best be seen in Watkins' sonnet, "The Dead Words":

So flies love's meteor to her shroud of winds.  
The crisp words couch in their last battling-place  
Where widowed silence, threaded like black lace,  
Held a dumb minute, stabs the dark like pins.  
It is so breathless. There the flower begins  
To seed, we know not how. There blows the race  
Of spirits, and they watch the stiff leaves brace  
With last look backward to the town of sins.

There clenches the close fist through wreath and wraithe 
The sooted page where wrought like golden wire 
The sly words glitter with an angel's breath; 
Love's moistening seal is mastered there entire, 
And the wind proves, where they are dressed for death, 
Cinders are priestlike in their tale of fire.

Out of this imagery of meteors, battle, flowers seeding, fists closing, and words that are dead, crisp, and sly, can we reach any idea of a central significance? At the risk of committing the "heresy of paraphrase," I find the meaning of the poem to be roughly this: the poet's words, though in a sense dead, are dormant as seeds are in winter; when the inherent artificality and insufficiency of these words are truly realized by the poet, then his words can come to birth with something of the Creator's spirit: a reflection or remembrance of Truth as cinders carry a remembrance of the fire from which they came.

No amount of analysis, one fears, can ever make all aspects or images of this poem completely clear. Nor is it necessarily desirable for us to become exact in our interpretation of its meaning. As Brooks says,

"...the paraphrase is not the real core of meaning which constitutes the essence of the poem...Indeed, whatever statement we may seize upon as incorporating the "meaning" of the poem, immediately the imagery and the rhythm seem to set up tensions with it, warping and twisting it, qualifying and revising it."

It is interesting to note, too, that Watkins' superficially simple poems may have equally complicated or obscure meanings. "Sycamore," for example, has the lilt of a simple, lovely song:

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55 Ibid, p. 185.  
O, I am green and fair:
Is there a fairer tree?
Who is it underneath
Sleeps the sleep of death?
There is no answer there.
There is no answer there.

Centuries made me firm.
Far I have spread my roots.
I grip the flying stream.
Aching, I drop my fruits.
Who is it sleeps below?
Who is it sleeps below?

Who sleeps? The young streams feed
My boughs. The blind keys spin.
Hark, he is dead indeed.
Never shall fall again
My natural, winged seed
On this small-statured man.

But what, exactly, is the relationship of the tree to the man buried underneath? Does the tree represent the continuity of nature—a theme often dealt with by Watkins? Yet the tree, too, will partake of death; and it is already dead, in a sense, to the man buried beneath. Do the blind keys hold the secret to life and death? Clearly, the ideas in this poem are more complex than the simple verse form would indicate.

Another apparently simple poem is Watkins' "Hunter":

Naked in woods apart,
A radiance in his eyes,
He crouches to surprise
The breathing hart;
So kneels to aim his dart;
The feathered arrow flies;
The peril he defies
Stands here, revealed by art.

A touch, and time is gone.
The loins their flight fulfil;
Mark the dead hunter's skill
Here where his window shone.

Look, and the limbs are still.
Walk, and the eyes look on.

The poet is apparently looking at a painting of the hunter. In the
sense of its being an art work, the moment has been frozen, and "Stands here, revealed by art." The closeness of life and death, the lack of finality of either state, are revealed as we note that the hunter, who defies the peril of death, is himself dead. The peril he defies, then, is time's effect—the death of each moment. And the haunting last lines again suggest the life force which connects man, nature, and art.

In form and style, then, Watkins' poetry is characterized by a high degree of skill and of control of material. Conservative in matters of form, he achieves great variety within the form by his ability to use the elements of meter and rhythm, diction, syntax, stanza, and imagery. If we are occasionally disappointed because we sense a barrier of reserve between ourselves and Watkins, we are more often astonished at the wide range of his ideas and at the artistry with which he presents them in a style that is traditional, yet distinctively his own.
THE BALLADS

"In a set of eight ballads in The Death Bell, Vernon Watkins has produced perhaps the finest of recent literary ballads."\(^1\) This high praise was echoed in a letter written in 1938 from Dylan Thomas to Watkins: "I've always liked your ballads very much, and so far--inevitably--the ballads and lyrics mean more to me than the long and complicated poems."\(^2\) Indeed, the ballads must come to hold a special place in the affections of anyone who has studied Watkins' poetry. For in these narrative poems, he proves himself a born story-teller, who makes the best possible use of traditional ballad elements without necessarily restricting himself to such traditions. Albert Friedman has commented on Watkins' use of the traditional and modern elements in his ballads:

> Each is rich in stylized phrases patterned after traditional ballad expression and passages of repetition that set up an incantatory rhythm in ballad fashion; and though the speakers (coins, darkness, a skeleton, a piece of driftwood) belong to allegory and animism and the poet assumes a vatic role, the concrete ballad imagery and the matter of factness of the medium make the experience imaginatively palpable.\(^3\)

> It is in the creation of the ballad mood or atmosphere that Watkins has proved himself a master. Any variations from the traditional ballad form are scarcely noticed by the reader, who finds himself caught


\(^3\) The Ballad Revival, p. 347.
up at once in a scene, situation, or story created and maintained by flawlessly appropriate diction and imagery—as well as by the indefinable ability of the tale-spinner to hold his audience until the last word is told.

Probably the best known and most often anthologized of Watkins' ballads is "The Collier", a poem of interest not only as a work of art, but as one of the rare poems indicating Watkins' awareness of social problems. Using traditional ballad meter, but with the unusual instance of first-person voice, the poem immediately establishes a mood of foreboding:

When I was born on Amman hill
A dark bird crossed the sun.
Sharp on the floor the shadow fell;
I was the youngest son.

It is interesting to note that Watkins, even in the first stanza, does not allow the rhythmic pattern to become monotonous. The trochaic foot at the beginning of the third line, forcing the accent on Sharp, accomplishes this effect. Entirely appropriate to the setting of the ballad mood is the simple image of the "dark bird" which crosses the sun. The sense of foreboding hinted at in this image continues in the next stanza:

And when I went to the County School
I worked in a shaft of light.
In the wood of the desk I cut my name:
Dai for Dynamite.

It is no accident, of course, that the boy works not in a ray or beam of light, but in a shaft. The mention of dynamite in the last line also gives a suggestion of terror to come.
The tall black hills my brothers stood;
Their lessons all were done.
From the door of the school when I ran out
They frowned to watch me run.

The image of the "tall black hills" says all that need be said about these elder brothers--their appearance and their relationship to the boy.

With the fifth stanza, a widening of the poem's significance occurs:

A coloured coat I was given to wear
Where the lights of the rough land shone.
Still jealous of my favour
The tall black hills looked on.

Now, obviously, the boy is not only a poor Welsh youth, but is metaphorically the Biblical Joseph. This image continues in the next stanza:

They dipped my coat in the blood of a kid
And they cast me down a pit,
And although I crossed with strangers
There was no way up from it.

Here the boy's despair is clearly shown. The strangers who pulled Joseph from his pit are no help to one born in a situation in which "Clever or clumsy, lad or lout,/ All would look for a wage."

Soon as I went from the County School
I worked in a shaft. Said Jim,
'You will get your chain of gold, my lad,
But not for a likely time.'

The "chain of gold" image seems to refer to the boy's hope for something better than a life in the mines, for it recalls Joseph's achievement of wealth in Pharaoh's court. But the next stanza, in true ballad fashion, suggests rather than tells what has happened:

And Tom, the shivered his leper's lamp
For the stain that round him grew;
And I heard mouths pray in the after-damp
When the picks would not break through.

Watkins' ability, in the above stanza, to suggest the sheer horror of the mining accident in the simplest of language, is remarkable indeed.
And in the end, the young collier has come, in death, as close as he will ever come to Joseph's exalted state:

They changed words there in darkness
And still through my head they run,
And white on my limbs is the linen sheet
And gold on my neck the sun.

"Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" is a playlet, perhaps better adapted for radio or for an oral reading than for stage presentation. Though far from the traditional ballad form, this work still maintains the ballad mood and probably no reader would feel that it is misnamed.

Watkins has given some notes of explanation concerning the background of "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd." On the last night of the year, according to ancient Welsh custom, the Mari Lwyd or Grey Mare, a horse's head modeled in wood, painted, and hung with ribbons, was carried from house to house by a party of "singers, wits and impromptu poets, who, on the pretext of blessing, boasting of the sanctity of what they carried, tried to gain entrance to a house for the sake of obtaining food and drink. The method they used was to challenge those within to a rhyming contest." These singers came every year to the house of Watkins' father, where, as Watkins says, "Listening to them at midnight, I found myself imagining a skull, a horse's skull decked with ribbons, followed and surrounded by all kinds of drunken claims and holy deception."5

The ballad is primarily constructed as a dialogue between living men and the dead. Watkins explains, "I have attempted to bring together those who are separated. The last breath of the year is their threshold, the moment of supreme forgiveness, confusion and understanding, the

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4 Ballad of the Mari Lwyd (London, 1941), p. 91.

5 Ibid., p. 91.
profane and sacred moment impossible to realize while the clock-hands divide the Living from the Dead." 6

Though the Christian faith makes itself felt throughout the poem, it is mixed with a primitive paganism, somewhat as early Christianity must have existed in ancient Wales. Perhaps, too, the primitive ideas of death which give the ballad its eerie quality are never completely overcome by the most enlightened of us.

From the beginning of the ballad, Watkins proves himself a master of the creation of suspense and horror:

Hark at the hands of the clock.
Now dead men rise in the frost of the stars
And fists on the coffins knock.

Nor are these dead in the category of friendly spirits:

They dropped in their graves without one sound;
Then they were steady and stiff.
But now they tear through the frost of the ground
As heretic, drunkard and thief.

Throughout there is an emphasis on time. For this is the last moment of the year--the time when dead and living meet. Hence, the refrain is often repeated:

Hark at the hands of the clock.

And the eeriness of the hour is emphasized by the images of a second refrain:

The sands in the glass, the shrinking sands,
And the picklock, picklock, picklock hands.

The nature of the dead is further revealed:

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6Ibid., p. 92.
Good men gone are evil become
And the men that you nailed down
Clamped in darkness, clamour for rum,
And ravish on beds of down
The vision your light denied them...

Living men strive to forget the dead:

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.

But the dead will not be forgotten. They come with their picklock hands,
insisting on their right of entry by means of the rhyming contest:

But dry as the grave from Gruffydd Bryn
We are come without one rest;
And now you must let our Mari in:
She must inspire your feast.

The living refuse:

Go back. We have heard of dead men's bones
That hunger out in the air.

They rip the seams of their proper white clothes
And with red throats parched for gin,
With buckled knuckles and bottle-necked oaths
They hammer the door of an inn.

Watkins' diction, in stanzas such as the previous one, is quite
remarkable when contrasted with the diction of his lyric poetry. In
these ballads, he keeps the most vivid and keen sense of life at its most
earthy—of food and drink, of drunkards and gluttons, and of the terror
waiting for men in the dark of the night. No line with anything of the
force and vigor of "With buckled knuckles and bottle-necked oaths" is to
be found in his lyrics, even at their finest.
Minor variations appear as the refrain recurs:

The slinking dead, the shrinking sands,
And the picklock, picklock, picklock hands.

As Brooks and Warren have pointed out, repetition may do many things in a ballad. It may give the poem form or bring it under control, or it may serve as a binder from section to section. But most interestingly, it may develop secondary and symbolic meanings which increase with each repetition. Thus, this refrain in "Ballad of the Mari Lwyd" increasingly comes to signify that the separation between living and dead is tissue-thin—that time is running out for those who still partake of life. This close connection between the two states is brought out again and again:

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.

The living are reminded of their connection with the stream of life:

Know you are one with Cain the farm
And Dai of Dowlais pit;
You have thieved with Benjamin's robber arm;
With Delilah you lay by night.
You cheated death with Bessie and the Cross
When the dice of Hell came down.

And they continue to threaten:

I see in your eyes white terror,
I see in your locked hands hate.
Press, we are one step nearer
The live coals in the grate.

When they plead for life, it is in earthy terms:

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7*Understanding Poetry*, p. 123.
'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!'

The confusion of Christian and pagan adds ironic contrast:

Dread and quiet, evil and good:
Frost in the night has mixed their blood.

Thieving and giving, good and evil:
The beggar's a saint, and the saint a devil.

Betrayed are the living, betrayed the dead:
All are confused by a horse's head.

The ironic juxtaposition of life and death, Christianity and paganism,
sanity and madness, appears even more forcefully in this stanza:

Resurrection's wings and corruption's moth
Beat on the window-pane.
The tombs are ripped like a table-cloth,
And madmen teach the sane.
A voice redresses those ancient wrongs
With a wrong more deep than all.
Holy Charity's bastard songs
Burst from a seawave's fall.

What, finally, is the Mari Lwyd, this strange horse's head? Perhaps it most closely symbolizes the ideas of death as it seems to living men—to those who, awakened in the middle of the night, may begin to think with dread of bodily dissolution and the loss of earthly joys.

Thus, the living men whisper to one another:

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...

And the ending proves the eventual triumph of time:

Hark at the hands of the clock.

Of the ballads grouped together in The Death Bell, each has some-
thing of special interest. "Ballad of the Two Tapsters" emphasizes Watkins' ability to suggest a story without explicit detail. The "heroes" in this tale are unscrupulous rascals, whose tale is told with a blending of sordid life with the supernatural. Having filled their empty wine casks with the sea, they stop a cart-man, "old Beatwind":

'O where are you going to, Beatwind?'
'To Putney's market of wine.'
'And have you got a corner on that cart of yours For a butt or a barrel of mine?'

'What wine would it be that you might sell, And how shall you pay the fee, Who are banned from the vineyards of Rhine, Moselle, Champagne and Burgundy?'

Two tapsters laugh in the sunlight, In the Winter sunlight cold. 'Now, waggoner, wager your cart and horse, Here's a barrel your men won't hold.'

Then two men tried to take it, And four, and six men tried, But the strongest sinews seemed like straw That floats on Atlantic's side.

The ballad ends with a sardonically humorous moral:

Be warned, you Thames-side traders, If gambling men you be, You cannot bend to the shores of the world Or strive with the great dark sea.

"Ballad of the Trial of Sodom" is an accounting of Abraham's attempt to save Sodom from God's wrath. In its note of simplicity, almost of colloquialism, it has something of the quality of a Negro spiritual:

And Abram pondered.
He could not make amends.
It lightened and thundered.
He counted up his friends.

The refrain is a curious one:
Death is terrible, a thing of wonder.
First is a lethargy that no man likes,
Then comes the moment when the lightning strikes.

In keeping with the Biblical story, the ballad ends as

Down looked Abram,
And he lost his case.

"Ballad of Crawley Woods" has as its spokesman a skeleton, who rises from the grave to find the love of God. The poem is full of creatures from the world of cemeteries at midnight—a monster who bids "a virgin good/ Rise up from his own grave...", a skeleton, a mysterious horseman, and lovers of whom it is said, "All these the night-winds marry/ Must wed beneath the mould." The ballad ends with an explicit moral, which accomplishes the task of bringing the world of nightmare back to saneness, the dead back to their graves.

Now this is the Ballad of Crawley Woods;
No more is there to say.
Now let the rich man give his goods,
Nor keep the poor away,
But think of him who lies there still
And wishes all men well,
Hearing the branches on the hill,
Hearing the breakers' bell.

"Ballad of the Three Coins" has something of the tone of Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner." A beautifully constructed poem, its pattern can be followed throughout. Like a true ballad, it breaks into the heart of its tale at once.

I know this road like the back of my hand
From birth to the lonely sea
With a bindblown dog and a bottle of sand,
And I count my curses three.

His curses are three "coins":
Swollen shoes, a pole and a pack,
And three considered coins;
A pain in the head, a pain in the back,
And a great pain in the groins.

The curses seem to be three desires: the first, for wisdom, gift of Athene; the second, for pride and ambition, gift of Juno; the third, for love, gift of Night. As part of the pattern, the first gift comes at dawn, the second at noon, the third at midnight.

But none of the gifts is more than a curse to the spokesman, who cries:

O let me be, you women!
O my coins were curses three.
The first I carried, the second I buried,
The third I'll cast to the sea.

And he voices his disillusion with these supposed values:

What if, when I come to the yellow-white foam,
Nothing I can see
But a bottle up to its neck in sand
And a wet dog peeled by the sea?

The barren bears the fruits of the Earth
And the fruit bears barrenness.
The sun and the moon know nothing,
And between them I know less.

But Watkins is always at his finest when he writes of the sea; and his sea-ballads are likewise especially fine. "Ballad of Culver's Hole" concerns a smuggler pursued by officers:

Two boats close in from East and West
On a little boat that feels
The lucky weight of Culver
Gripping the stolen creels.

A moment later, Culver has vanished among the rocks of the shore. And the people watching from the cliff answer all questions with: "We know nothing, we know nothing...We hear nothing, we hear nothing...." The
leader of the officers, furious that his prey has escaped, organizes a search; but another officer cautions that the sea is becoming more and more dangerous. The first officer finally must agree:

'The dark is helping the digging mole
To cut our exit off.
Who could smoke out a smuggler's hole
In a sea so blind and rough?

God rot the guts of Culver
By whom the good man dies.
He laughs behind a wall of rock
Where every rock has eyes.'

And in the end,

Their noose is for that goose of the sea,
But they have not caught him yet.
A barrel rises slowly
Just where the sun had set.

"Ballad of the Rough Sea" returns to a favorite theme of Watkins'--the meeting of the living and dead. In this case, the living is "the man on the top of Dover cliff" and the dead is "the fossil man in his bed of chalk." The sight of these two meeting puts the fear of death into the hearts of nearby fishermen, who cry:

'O wandering water white and free
As the runaway stag that hides in the tree,
As the runaway stag that flies from the horn,
Fly to the low roof where we were born
And pull the door from the hinge and throw
The seven wild windows all in a row
And the tables and chairs in the room below
Through the white sea-jaws throw!

There are loaves of bread in the wooden chest
And safe on the hooks the white cups rest
And high on the shelf are sugar and tea
But cold is the darkness under the sea.
There's a floor unsafe beneath
And the sea has a wolf's white teeth.
O sweet would it be to beg and breathe.
There's a floor unsafe beneath.'
The vigor, the violence, the raw emotion of these lines is almost breath-taking. And again, the sense of death in terms of deprivation of earthly joys is movingly presented.

"Ballad of the Equinox" is another sea-ballad, but with only a touch of the story-telling element. Its effect comes rather from the creation of a mood through vivid scene-setting and powerful imagery.

Pwlldu—an eternal place!
The black stream under the stones
Carries the bones of the dead,
The starved, the talkative bones.

Beyond Hunt's moonlike bay,
That pockmarked crescent of rocks,
White horses, dead white horses,
Priests of the equinox,

Deride my lonely curse,
And the moon rides over, pale,
Where the wicked wet dog in the hearse
And the devil in the wind prevail.

When the spokesman picks up a sea-sodden stick, it begins to speak:

Though itself a barren thing,
It has been where none has been,
Knows what no actor knows
On this theatrical scene:

'O unsatisfied!
0 terrible and alone!
Come to the edge of the tide
And find what none has known,

That the allegorical shadow
Of the lover will not swerve
Though the moon drive him to madness
With its sailing curve.'

This cryptic message should certainly be considered an incantation, not to be given over to the critic's probe!

"Ballad of Hunt's Bay" is one of Watkins' finest works--ballad or lyric. Each stanza contains three rhymed lines, a pattern which Watkins,
with customary skill, never allows to become monotonous.

It was a grey and ghoulish day;
The rocks were hidden or taken to pray,
But the 'Maid of Ireland' kept her way.

The last line, concerning the ship, 'Maid of Ireland,' is repeated as a refrain. But it is used ironically, for it is soon clear that the ship has sunk.

The wreck was crowded with bundles of straw,
Jettisoned palliasse, planks, and raw
Ropes entangled with wing and claw.

The entire poem is a masterpiece of presentation of the tragedy of the ship's sinking, as seen in the imagery of the shore.

Sucked by bells, the shingle ground
Out of the ebb a deathlike sound
Of nail-torn sea-wood, bones of the drowned.

Day is shrunk to a bubbling seed.
Double your back to the smell of the weed.
Black in the pools, the wet planks bleed.

Scrubbed bark, and a bone picked clean;
Two sharp rocks, and a log between.
Under the surface, hands unseen.

Voices, inch-shallow, I mark and miss.
The cormorant flies from them. Cold shells hiss.
Land shudders back from the dead's white kiss.

When the souls of the drowned men cry out:

"O cross the water, far and wide,"
Cries the floating wood and the breath inside,
"Fly to my mother--"
"my lost--"
"my bride."

The sea gives its answer in action:

And blind with fury the sea runs in,
Nailing their hands to a rustgold tin,
Guilty, and white with the breath of men.

When the spokesman picks up a broken stick, it begins to speak:
"I am the bone the salt winds bleach.
Me the widows of hope beseech.
I am the rope that did not reach."

And in a final act,

And I fling the broken stick away
With the world and the ocean under its sway;
And silence pulls the thunders away.

Watkins' ballads are surely among the finest of their kind produced in our time—and perhaps deserve to be ranked among the finest poems of any kind in our time. But the rank of the ballads among Watkins' own work is unique, as well. Whether telling a story or presenting a scene, Watkins achieves outstanding results. His diction, in the ballads, is terse, strong, and vigorous; his syntax is never vague, but always compact, exact, often colloquial; his rhythms are strong, but never tiresome; and his imagery is vivid, concrete, and above all, imaginative. There is, in the ballads, no feeling that Watkins has withdrawn or withheld his deepest thoughts, no sense of abstraction when feelings might be exposed, no over-intellectual coolness at the expense of emotional quality. In these poems, whether dealing with dead sailors, ruffians and smugglers, or wicked wet dogs, Watkins' verse takes on a wonderfully vivid sense of life which is sometimes lacking in his more formal poetry. It is above all this sense of throbbing life, of breathing, eating, drinking, quarrelling, dying humanity, which puts Watkins' ballads at the pinnacle of his work. May he write many more!
A FOUNDATION FOR LIFE AND ART

1. Nature

Underlying Watkins' poetry as a whole is his view of three aspects of human experience: nature, time, and religion. Because these three categories form the basis for his interpretation of life and of art, one or more of them appear in almost every poem. And though the categories of nature, time, and religion are often woven together with great intricacy, an attempt will be made to separate them in this paper, in order to see clearly what Watkins' conception of each may be.

Nature, in its beauty, its grandeur, its mystery, and sometimes its horror, has always fascinated and inspired poets, and there is no reason why it should not do so today. Yet, as has already been mentioned, "The term nature poetry has fallen into such disrepute that no one wants to apply it to poems he likes...."¹ D. S. Savage likewise claims that "since Shakespeare the history of English poetry is one of gradual impoverishment of the medium of verse," an impoverishment "intimately connected with man's alienation from his natural sources."² This process of estrangement of man from nature, which manifests itself in man's increasing control over the secrets of the natural world and in the increasing denaturalization of his environment, results in "...a progressive subordination of nature to the world of man, of countryside to the city, of


²The Personal Principle, p. 60.
particularity to standardization, until in our own time the structure of civilization has virtually severed itself from its organic foundations.\textsuperscript{3}

But what, after all, is the ill-effect of a poet's being alienated from nature? Are there not many other aspects of life which can give him poetic inspiration? Certainly we have seen clearly in this century that even the ugliest and tawdriest areas of urban life can be made a part of poetry. Yet Vincent Buckley has suggested that a poet "divorced from natural processes, grown unused to thinking in terms of nature, and to reflecting on one's own destiny as it is inflected by nature...loses the capacity for metaphor."\textsuperscript{4} And Savage has added the thought that because nature is the area of the tangible, concrete, and particular, a poet who loses touch with nature may lose the physical quality or immediacy which is one of the most important sources of poetic strength.\textsuperscript{5}

Even in our own highly mechanized century, however, there have been poets who turned to the writing of nature poetry. The Georgian poets of 1912-1922 emphasized "the muted note, the blend of countryside observation and harmless, charming fancy"\textsuperscript{6} in verse that was undisturbing and pleasant. A more important kind of nature poetry arises when poetry has become over-intellectualized, and when certain poets come to feel a driving urge to reinvigorate both the poetic medium and human consciousness through a communion with nature. Savage has included Wordsworth, Gerard Manley

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{3}Ibid., pp. 59-60
\item \textsuperscript{4}"Notes on Religious Poetry," \textit{Encounter}, IX, iii (1957), p. 61
\item \textsuperscript{5}\textit{The Personal Principle}, p. 64
\item \textsuperscript{6}Thomas Blackburn, \textit{The Price of an Eye}, pp. 73-74.
\end{itemize}
Hopkins, and D. H. Lawrence among such writers; and Robert Frost, Marianne Moore and Vernon Watkins are part of the same tradition.

Though modern nature poetry becomes part of an ancient stream of poetic inspiration, it may differ from the traditional in a number of ways. Of the subject matter of modern nature poetry, Langbaum says, "It is about the tropics or the sea, the primeval sources of life, that contemporary poets are apt to write...." Such poetry is often concerned with animal or bird life, for these creatures are "the landscape crystallized into movement and consciousness...." Indeed, contemporary nature poetry often deals with the thin line separating nonliving from living creatures, because, as Langbaum has explained, "The new concept of the unconscious...has extended mind to the very borderline between animate and inanimate nature."  

Modern nature poets may also differ from traditional poets in their own relationship to the natural sources. Amos Wilder comments:

In our relation to nature we have the ground of something universal in man which is, moreover, an unmistakable element of the religious consciousness. This element may often be starved in the conditions of modern life. For that reason and because the religious tradition has lost its hold on many, the modern secular artist may turn to nature as a surrogate for other forfeited sources of meaning. 

But nature may be more than a mere "surrogate." Indeed, Langbaum suggests

7The Personal Principle, pp. 64-65.  
9Ibid., pp. 331-332.  
10Ibid., p. 332  
that the ultimate subject of nature poetry must be the divinity in nature. "It is when we see nature as a source of both life and death that appreciation turns into worship."\textsuperscript{12} Thus, whether nature is, for the modern poet, a replacement for religious belief, or whether it is an extension of an already held religious belief, the poet's view of nature will range far beyond mere description.

Because the main effort of any poet should be "to explore the human being, and show how his destiny expands beyond the small circle of a present moment and conscious awareness, into further modes of existence,"\textsuperscript{13} the modern nature poet's most vital task is the uniting of himself and his experience. As Blackburn says, "Poetical knowledge implies a surrender of the knower to what he knows....It is not just a question of observation, however accurate, but of participation."\textsuperscript{14} In some modern poets, the sense of revelation involved in such participation may give rise to distorted or almost hallucinatory verse, a source of "constant rich surprise in the wedding of otherwise incongruous or alien materials."\textsuperscript{15}

Vernon Watkins, however, presents the participation of man and nature in a different way. As Vincent Buckley has pointed out, there is one question which poetry is uniquely fitted to explore: "Given the


\textsuperscript{13}Thomas Blackburn, \textit{The Price of an Eye}, p. 20.

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., p. 93.

\textsuperscript{15}Amos Wilder, \textit{Modern Poetry and the Christian Tradition}, pp. 97-98
existence of a supernatural world, what has it to do with the world of
man and of nature; how may the superior world be apprehended through
the inferior?" Because Watkins is a Christian poet, he is doubly
capable of dealing with this question. Despite the excellence of his
close observation and his skill in presenting it in verse, it is his
ability to show the natural world as it is in the eyes of a twentieth-
century Christian that gives his nature poetry its special value. For
as Philip Wheelwright says, "Things have contexts, but only a person
has perspectives. The essential excuse for writing, then, is to unveil
as best one can some perspective that has not already become ordered into
a public map." 

Buckley has commented that analogy seems to him the only means
for dealing with nature as God's creation, and this method, in its
broadest sense, is that used by Watkins. That is, nature is for him an
explanation as well as a symbol for life, for art, and for all the mystery
of a universe that is the handiwork of God.

No poet who uses nature as subject matter, however, can hope to
write about all of it; and so he will usually choose a special area of
interest, based on natural inclination or environment. Thus, we associ­
ate the nature of farmlands with Robert Frost and that of animals--
especially those in zoos--with Marianne Moore. Watkins, too, has his

17 Metaphor and Reality, p. 16.
area of interest: the seacoast of Wales, near Swansea, where he makes his home. His deliberate choice of this homeland, which he knows "like the back of his hand," is made clear in "Two Decisions":

Let me be nowhere
A melodramatic guest
Since here as anywhere
The light is best.
Though distant things entreat
The afraid, the fanciful,
The near is faithful:
Do not deny it.

Within this area, three categories of nature are of special importance in Watkins' verse. The first, and probably most vital, is that of the sea, a category including not only the ocean itself, but the myriad of things which make up the shore—shells, fossils, sea-caves, parts of wrecked ships, and the debris of man and nature. The second category is that of bird life, particularly that of the sea-birds. The third category is a broad one, including the seasons, storms, starry skies, seedlings, trees, flowers, and snow. It is interesting, too, to notice one or two areas in which Watkins shows little interest. Animals, whether of farm, home, or zoo, play little part in his view of nature. But one finally exception to this rule is "The Mare":

Her body is utterly given to the light, surrendered in perfect abandon
To the heaven above her shadow, still as her first-born day.
Softly the wind runs over her. Circling the meadow, her hooves
Rest in a race of daisies, halted where butterflies stand.

Watkins also shows little interest in farming, or in the aspects of nature connected with farmlands; but in another fine exception, he uses the image of "Returning from Harvest" to present a view of the fate of men:
And however the intellect
Predict the pattern of days,
It is never repeated. Always
A change we did not expect

Interprets the sickle gleaning
High sheaves for a sheltered place.

But those aspects of nature with which Watkins deals, again and
again, have also been used by poets through the ages. It is possible for
a poet who restricts himself to traditional forms to write about these
time-worn subjects without being imitative or derivative? An occasional
stanza in Watkins may seem to indicate that the answer to this question
will be no.

About him the air fell sweet with singing.
Very close to his eyes a bird was carrying moss.
It gathered a wisp of straw, pecked, and looked up,
And flew to a secret nest. He watched the bough
Tremble. Now it was still. There was dew on the field.
Petals began to close. The roots of the elms
Held his wonder: 'Be warned: about you are symbols.'
("Poet and Goldsmith")

Happily, Watkins is seldom either this explicit or this trite in his nature
verse; and to be fair, we must note that this is only one stanza from a poem
which becomes considerably more worthwhile as it progresses. And if there
is an occasional verse like the above stanza, there are many more which are
brilliant and original in depiction, imagery, and creative skill, even when
dealing with as traditional a subject as that of starry skies.

Great nights returning, midnight's constellations
Gather from groundfrost that unnatural brilliance.
Night now transfigures, walking in the starred ways,
Tears for the living.
("Great Nights Returning")

How full the clustered sky!
Beyond the uncounted crop
of stars I still descry
Where the white millstream runs
Glittering in ghostly race
New multitudes of suns,
While here galactic space
Hangs, like a frozen drop.

Night, with her teeming brood
Unites the faculties
To polarize the blood
Moving, yet fixed and still,
Drawn to her secret North.
The same unerring will
That called conception forth
Now bids the bloodstream freeze.
("Bread and the Stars")

While Watkins may celebrate the beauty in nature, he is never
guilty of "prettifying" what he sees. He knows the beauty of the sea,
but he is also aware of "the blind wave" which gropes "forward to the
sand/ With a greedy, silvered hand" ("Griefs of the Sea"). His beaches
are not immaculate stretches of sand, but are littered with

  Black tousled weeds,
  Bundles of foam, bottles,
  Oil, shivering seeds,
  Urchins, razorshells, cuttles,
  And clouds, combed like fleece...
  ("Hunt's Bay")

Though Langbaum claims that the best twentieth century nature poetry
opposes the pathetic fallacy,19 Watkins makes free use of this poetic de-
vice. Yet Watkins' verse is never offensive in its personification of
natural forces, perhaps because he gives these forces a strong character.
Wicked or beneficent, the wind, sea, or storm has in his poetry the power
of a pagan god:

Icily keen the wind blows, still from the East
Driving the wrinkled tide.
All's withered on one side.
For twenty days it has not ceased
Thrusting against mankind its edge and hate.
The rock resists, borne on its own dead weight.
There the winged form of a lost age
Is fixed, defying from these rocks
The merciless, cold-eyed equinox,
Set to annihilate life with its blind rage.
("Ode at the Spring Equinox")

At its best, nature poetry seems to depend on the fusion of three elements: the poet's keen observation of nature; his ability to sense the deeper significance of what he has experienced; and his skill in uniting his observations and interpretations in imagery. In Watkins' poetry, the sense of deeper significance which invests the whole with its individual quality can be noted in several different aspects.

For one thing, all of nature is part of the never ending life-stream. This life-stream includes the idea of continuity of the species, a symbol for Watkins of the continuity of life itself:

the wandering bird,
Unchanged through generations and renewed,
Perpetual child of its own solitude,
The same on rocks and over sea I hear
Return now with his unreturning year.
How swiftly now it flies across the sands,
Image of change: unchanging, changing lands
From year to year, yet always found near home
Where waves in sunlight break in restless foam.
Old though the cave is, this outlives the cave,
And the grey pool that shuddered when it gave
The landscape life, reveals where time has grown,
Turning green, slowly forming tears to stone.
("The Curlew")

This life-stream excludes neither the dead nor the inanimate. When the poet catches a dead shag in his net, it seems at first "A blackened piece of a tree...a cold black thing." But then he finds in the dead creature
a sense of life:

Then at once I caught the thrill
Of a wing in the fire-wake charred.
Shag: a mummified bird.
The sea-flash never is still.
("The Dead Shag")

This sense of life is noted in the fossils of the shore:

Rest in your bed, yet ask that bed:
What if,
Unseen by man, the fossil also moves
Where stone,
Hammered by centuries of sun and wind
Deep in the cliff,
Will not lie still in darkness, but instead
Repeats the bivalve's track, its winding grooves,
The nerve still gripping though the limb is gone?
("The Fossil")

And life of a sort may still be found in empty shells:

Yet the shell knows
Only its own dark chamber
Coiled in repose
Where without number
One by one goes
Each blind wave, feeling mother-of-pearl and amber;
Flooded, to close
A book all men might clasp, yet none remember.
("The Shell")

The very rocks which line the sea coast have a measure of life:

Each life is hidden in the ringing stone
That rests, unmatched by any natural thing,
And joins, unheard, the wave-crest and the wing.
("The Curlew")

I have walked this beach alone,
I have startled with my praying
The cloven tongue of stone...
("Hunt's Bay")

Here I hold breath, knowing the door of my friends
Is rock, and I am exiled from their tribe.
I put my ear to the ground, I plant my foot
Against grey rock, but wind and seawave smother
The stone's coiled fossil-saga; this navel-knot
Fastens my moving to the great rock-mother.
("Stone Footing")
For Watkins, the source of all nature is, simply, God:

My Lord prescribed  
The paths of the planets.  
His finger scattered  
The distant stars.  
He shaped the grave shore's  
Ringing stones  
And gave to the rocks  
An echoing core.


Marrowed with air  
He made the birds.  
Fish he sowed  
In the restless wave.  

("Taliesin and the Mockers")

Though God's world has unity, this unity is in no sense pantheistic.

Rather, it is as though only a sheer curtain separated one form of nature from another, so that, as Watkins puts it, "Who touches one dead blossom touches every star." ("Music of Colours: The Blossom Scattered"). This oneness stems from the birth of all things from one Creator:

The sun, the sea, and the wind are three  
But he narrows them down with a dreaming eye.  
With his hands at rest and his drawn-up thigh  
He can imagine the sacred tree.

For a point of light has seeded all  
And the beautiful seed has come to rest  
For a sunblown moment in his breast,  
A tree where the leaves will never fall.  
("The Sunbather")

Nature, itself, is a source of worship and praise:

How like a wing that single petal  
Breaks from the gold eye fixed on darkness,  
Born like the solitary to stillness,  
Praising alone what surpasses nature.  
("Swan Narcissus")

Christ, where the cold stream ran  
Which now lies locked in doubt,  
A proud cockphea sant can  
Stret cing its plumage out  
More praise you than the rest  
With his gold crest.  
("Poets, in Whom Truth Lives")
Nature may also symbolize the whole area of religious life, either as a source of faith or of temptation:

I cannot sound the nature of that spray
Lifted on wind, the blossoms falling away,
A death, a birth, an earthy mystery,
As though each petal stirring held the whole tree
That grew, created on the Lord's day.
('Music of Colours: The Blossom Scattered')

The winds are mad about this time,
Mad the storm's outrageous drum,
Man himself a witless mime
Because the equinoctials come
To snap the needle of his fate,
Tempting his eternal state.
('Hunt's Bay')

Time built your room three-walled
Where Fear, a nursling, crawled,
But at the fourth wall I
Bring the starred sky
And the scented world.
('Time's Deathbed')

The ability of nature to bring time to a halt, as seen in the above stanza, is illustrated again in "Swan Narcissus":

This, as the star knows night, knows earthspring.
Torn from the husk and coil of seasons,
Sprung from dark earth, in the air it rises,
Printing on time its eternal pattern.

Birth, death, and immortality are also closely linked with nature. Into "Birth and Morning," for example, Watkins cunningly weaves the birth of a child, the coming of spring and of morning, and the theme of resurrection:

Birth and morning: full night pulled down to the earth
Drenched by the violence of rain where the dawn wind dries
Buds in the trance of sunrise straining to ultimate birth,
Rigid, expecting Easter, released to the skies...

Though nature exemplifies death as well as birth, the idea of death is almost inevitably coupled with that of resurrection for Watkins. His
poetry therefore rarely reflects an utter sense of loss in the face of
the destruction of the beautiful and beloved.

Fate unforeseen, deformer of the branches,
Will grapple the great tree, lay it in the low field.
Out of such torment, fingers draw the Spring's
Evocative ritual.

("Thames Forest")

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

("Egyptian Burial: Resurrection in Wales")

As certain jewels have the power
To magnetize and guide the hour,
So seeds before our eyes are strewn
Fast hidden in the pod's cocoon.
These die, yet in themselves they keep
All seasons cradled in their sleep.

("The Tributary Seasons")

The snows of winter are often the agents of the necessary death before
spring's resurrection. Under "The Mask of Winter,"

A buried spring is born
In darkness, that makes full
Lambs from an ivory horn
Under the warmth of wool.

The sense of life beneath the snow is reiterated in "The Fire in the Snow":

Your eyes, I know, now read the tract
Beneath snow, where the grain lies packed,
Nor can the Winter sun deceive:
Black shuttles give you their leaves to weave.

Crisp, where you touch the secret loom,
Snow, from the fire-blue sky and from
A black root where all leaves begin,
Flames with a white light on your skin.

But nature has significance for the artist, as well as for the
religious man. Nature, faith, and art are united in this stanza from
"The Fossil":
If man brings honour to nature, then,
Cold earth,
Give back to man his detail. Let none write
Vague sound
To separate his truth from living words.
Their shape is worth
More than pretence, the false nest of the wren.
Keep strict that idiom printed on the night.
Even where life's magic vanishes through your mound,
Frail though the blossom seem, it is the Lord's,
Cast inward, crowned.

The sonnet, "Angelo's Adam," uses the kestrel as a symbol of the power of
form in art:

Exuberantly the kestrel rides the storm
Motionless, carved in air. It is the form
Speaking against the false forms it cast out
Whose fixed proportions still return with grace.
Athletic genius has no room for doubt
And laughs at all designs to take its place.

Probably the most explicit statement of the analogy between art and
nature—again, using the image of a bird—is found in "Art and the
Ravens."

Art holds in wind the way the ravens build
Breeding, flying, and still the thread holds fast.
Birth cries out, flying; and where the cry is stillled
Substance gives way, the talon grips the Past.
At the rock's foot fossils and wrecks are cast.
Still the cry wanders, though the cry is stillled.
Art holds in wind the way the ravens build.

The second stanza, using the ancient device of addressing the Muse, extends
the relation of art to time and to poetic craft:

Stand to time now, my Muse,
Unwavering, like this rock
The mated ravens use,
Building against the shock
Of dawn, a throne in air
Above the labouring sea,
Yet fine as a child's hair
Because great industry
Accomplishes no art
To match the widespread wing
Riding the heavens apart,
A lost, yet living thing.

Watkins' sense of the limitations of man's creation when compared to God's least feathered creature is indicated again:

Obscurity is fame;
Glory and praise are luck.
Nothing can live so wild
As those ambitious wings
Majestic...

But art's value is shown in the comparison of artistic creation with the birds' young:

O great, O guardian strength,
Vertical power of wings,
True plummet found at length
By devious reckonings
Your skirmishings protect
Love's brood, the hidden young,
By piercing intellect
High in the balance hung.
Far down, the breakers prove
Accomplishment all vain
Till art, the body of love,
Is won from death again.

"The Kestrel" indicates the creator's ability to produce form from chaos:

Stand then in storm; see fragments whirled
And pitched by waters to a place
Where wave on wave in mockery hurled
Shake the great sea-rock to its base.
And still the inviolate wing and claw
Hold chaos in the grip of grace.

That the Kestrel's beauty is in a sense a cruel beauty is also made clear:
High on the rock's grass verge you saw
Your quarry. You above that rock
Hung by inscrutable, patient law,

Motionless. Then you plunged, a block
Between that headland and the sky
Hiding you. Stalling in their flock

The startled herring-gulls gave cry...

The relation of the bird of prey to its creator is suggested in lines
which again point out the sense of continuity in nature:

Bird of my wrist, inspired you fly.

Who dares to think the storm untame
Can hurt or master you whom I,
Gathering the doom of all who die,
Uplift, in every age, the same?

As God makes the life-force continuous through his creation, so can the
poet make nature continuous, never-changing, through his art.

The above lines from "The Kestrel" indicate another aspect of
Watkins' feeling for nature. Though aware of the cruelties, as well as
the beauties, in God's creation, Watkins accepts nature as it is. In
"Buried Light," he seems not only to accept, but to celebrate, life's
mystery:

All hunting opposites I praise.
I praise the falcon and the dove.

Though Watkins never expresses concern for the struggle for existence of
many natural creatures in a world of spreading mechanized civilization,
he is well aware of what man can do:

but man,
Seizing the blind stone ignorance flings,
Himself can break this chain of wings
And, aiming, maim the loom where life began.
("Ode at the Spring Equinox")

It perhaps is most expressive of Watkins' feeling for nature as a source
of religious and artistic inspiration that his attitude toward nature is one of observation, not of interference. The natural world, the fruit of God's creation, does not require man's manipulation, but can best be appreciated as it presents itself, naturally. As Watkins concludes in his poem, "The Mare,"

Do not pass her too close. It is easy to break the circle
And lose that indolent fullness rounded under the ray
Falling on light-eared grasses your footstep must not wake.
It is easy to darken the sun of her unborn foal at play.

ii. Time

Where time is not, all nature is undone,
For nature grows in grandeur of decay.
These royal colours that the leaves put on
Mark the year living in his kingly way;
Yet, when he dies, not he but time is gone.

("The Immortal in Nature")

The mystery of time in its inevitable and irrevocable nature has fascinated or distressed poets from the beginning of the age of literature; and though Watkins has said that he is incapable of writing a poem completely dominated by time, this element occurs so frequently in his verse that we must notice what time means to this poet, if we are to understand his work.

Possibly the first and most obvious characteristic of time to Watkins is that it is paradoxical.

Old Triton Time responds to every mood:
He's the newborn who's older than the flood.
He babbles water from a dull stone tongue.
He's old and cold, and yet the water's young.
To gain him is to lose him.

("Old Triton Time")

Time can be a friend to man, bringing an increased sense of closeness with those loved ones in the grave. This delayed sense of communion Watkins has likened to the taste of the bitter sloe.

A flavour tart and late
Which, when the rest had gone,
Could hide in mist and wait,
Its root in stone.
("The Sloe")

And time has brought peace to the souls of Shelley and Keats in their Roman graves:

How still the graveyard: one at peace
And one so restless. Time must cease
Before they understand each other.
Yet now they do, for now their mother
Casts on them her falling leaves.
("In the Protestant Cemetery, Rome")

More often, however, time is an enemy; and though it can never be done away with, time can be brought to a stop, can lose its power to distort or destroy, by a number of different forces. Sometimes it is the beauty of nature which can halt time:

Time in a flash grown less
True than these glittering drops
Caught on a thread of glass...
("Poets in Whom Truth Lies")

Sometimes the love of friends can break its power:

Time begins and time ends
In the meeting of friends.
("Trust Darkness")

Tragedy may be the means of stopping time:

Tragedy, we have learnt from lives that pass,
Can, like a note of music, break time's glass...
("Niobe")

Or it may be art which brings time to a halt:
Think of Donne
Who could contract all ages to one day,
Knowing they were but copies of that one:
The first being true, then none can pass away.
("The Immortal in Nature")

As a Christian, Watkins views time as something that came to an end, then had new birth in the coming of Christ:

And time stopped still stopped when an ass went down
Slowly from Bethphage to that still town.
("Prime Colours")

The cradle stirs.
There life, there innocence, there the miracle shine.
Old, he is old:
Life's earliest word, the first. Light has created him
Out of inscrutable deeps.

And the light breathes;
It breathes in darkness, trembles, trembles and wakes.
There is no help,
There is no help in this room. The divining deluge
Thunders. Time is at hand.
("Serena")

Vital to Watkins' idea of time is his sense of the oneness of past, present, and future.

The Past is not the Past
But wound within a ring
So finely wrought
It knows each path and avenue of thought.
("The Turning of the Stars")

We approach youth in death,
The ecstatic dance in age.
Youth is itself infirm
Until those sightless eyes
Rarify youth and breath;
Then the miraculous form
Casts out a dying sage;
Always another dies.
("A Prayer against Time")

The ability of art to unite the ages is seen in Watkins' poem about Guinevere:
Time in weathercock and stone
Turns and tries to change her.
White as chalk or white as bone
Stands the rocky stranger.
Set her in the saddle now.
Let the water flying
And the kestrel tell you how
All but she is dying.
("Camelot")

Or, it may be nature which joins the ages:

Under your heels the icy breath of Winter
Hardens all roots. The Leonids are flying.
Now the crisp stars, the circle of beginning;
Death, birth, united.
("Great Nights Returning")

This idea is reiterated in lines such as these: "Ages are linked by water in the sunlight" ("Peace in the Welsh Hills"); and "...the stars of infinite distance,/ Needing the shape of a bird to knit our time to the timeless...." ("Before a Birth").

There is also a sense in which man's fate is part of what might be called the death-stream in time:

Come back. You were with us ages ago.
We have thrown your bones to the carrion gull.
To the dripping cave we have sold your skull,
And the delicate flower which was born to blow

Is lost in the flow of the marble sea.
We have made seaweeds out of your locks,
And your star-white bones in the vaulted rocks
Lie broken and cold, like shells in the scree.
("The Sunbather")

That there is a quality of life, even in this death-stream, is suggested in two of Watkins' poems dealing with the mummies of ancient Egyptians.

What has left music fast in the sockets of bone?
Had all been pattern, images sight had seen,
Blood would lie quiet, but something strokes the light,
and a groan
Of great-rooted calm repels those images...
("The Mummy")
Yet she, assembling in the light
Earth's broken hieroglyph, must watch the Nile confound
Antiquity with present sight,
Vision consuming death.
("Egyptian Burial: Resurrection in Wales")

The man who has no sense of the unity of history, of myth, of the
inseparable quality of past ages is a man who lacks something profound
and vital, Watkins seems to believe:

Touch you may and touch you can,
White and strange, the drifting wood,
But never touch the severed man
Torn from history for good,
Nailing to splints and spars
Night, and the turning stars.

But there are two aspects of time: its flowing, ever-changing nature,
and its permanence as a factor of life. The image of the fountain waters
spraying from a stone base seems particularly appropriate for demonstrat-
ing these dual qualities; and it is used by Watkins in a number of poems:

Time, by those dolphins' eyes, those hands,
Held ever still, the fountain grains deny...
("The Age-Changers")

Centuries, years, barbarian, scorned by schools,
Mellowing while minute-glasses caught their sands,
From sextant, compass far, from creeds and rules,
Water, like tears, has fallen through these hands.
("The Fountain")

The ages are unstrung
By water from a Triton flung...
("From My Loitering")

There, in some courtyard on the cobbled stone,
A fountain plays, and through a cherub's mouth
Ages are linked by water in the sunlight.
("Peace in the Welsh Hills")

The notion of childhood's freedom from time is found only rarely

in Watkins:
There little children run
And climb the singing stone
And their sweet dialect
Is learnt by none.

Shadows and leaves infect
The brooding intellect
Beneath whose tongueless wave
Those lives are wrecked.

But they low music have
Winding and gold and grave.
Time's measure they can set
By light, by love.

("From my Loitering")

The idea of a permanence underlying all change of time, on the other hand, is often reiterated. To express this sense of permanence beneath transience, Watkins often uses the image of the harp. Thus, he seems to suggest that a source of beauty underlies all time; but man must learn to recognize or play upon this source of music.

Touch with your fingers
The strings of song.
Love runs deeper
Than all time's wrong.

Time that is over
Comes not again;
Yet instinctive
The strings remain.
All is fugitive,
Nothing vain.

("Touch with your Fingers")

In "Taliesin and the Spring of Vision," Watkins raises the question of man's relationship to time:

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.
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.'
But for a Christian, acts of love or art are not enough of an answer to time:

Taliesin answered: 'I have encountered the irreducible diamond
In the rock. Yet now it is over. Omniscience is not for man. Christen me, therefore, that my acts in the dark may be just,
And adapt my partial vision to the limitation of time.

For time, to Watkins, cannot be properly understood without Christ. As Watkins writes in "For a Christening":

No future fate
Dismays us where we stand.
The centre is our state
Who hold time's sand
In scales of worship, though it falls by weight.

Of radiant love
Given starlike without stint
By Father, Son, and Dove,
Take now the print
Which death shall not obliterate, nor time move.

For time's old beat
Must change to music when
Fly to His steadfast feet
The souls of men,
And lightning play on every winding-sheet.

Inevitably, then, Watkins' ideas of time are bound up with his belief in immortality and in the unity of the living and the dead.

I cannot separate,
So soundlessly they shine,
The windings of past fate,
Nor the lost lives from mine.
("The Mask of Winter")

In the impressive "Great Nights Returning" is found a clear statement of Watkins' belief in immortality:

Nothing declines here. Energy is fire-born.
Twigs catch like stars or serve for your divining.
Lean down and hear the subterranean water
Crossed by the quick dead.
Now the soul knows the fire that first composed it
Sinks not with time but is renewed hereafter.
Death cannot steal the light which love has kindled
Nor the years change it.

The ideas of death, immortality, the beginning and ending of time—all these are intimately bound up with the poet's creative ability. Sometimes they may simply act as a rein on artistic pride:

When you are labouring, technically proud,
Like Ajax, or that great Greek charioteer,
Caught up in dazzle of your soul's career,
Think of the child here drowned, the simple shroud...
("Pegasus and the Child")

Or, they may serve as a source of true inspiration:

Little for the sun I cared,
Little for renown.
I saw the unknown, unshared,
True grave. So I lay down;

Lay down, and closed my eyes
To the end of all time,
The end of birth's enterprise
And death's small crime.

Then at once the shrouded harp
Was manifest. I began
To touch, though pain is sharp,
The ribs of the man.
("Three Harps")

Finally, the poet's art may accomplish a fusion of the neighboring states of life and death.

This lyre-bird holds to man
The covenant caught in a leaf,
All space, all distance treasured
By the architectural wing.
Lost art's unsearchable span,
The poem is shaped by belief:
If the song is justly measured
The dead may be heard to sing.
("Woodpecker and Lyre-bird")

Abstract and philosophical ideas of time are valuable, it goes without saying; but each man must live within a certain period of actual
calendar time as well. And for Watkins, as for us, this time has been
the hectic and difficult twentieth century. He has lived through years
of great hardship and depression in Wales; he has spent several years
of service in the Royal Air Force; he has seen his children grow up under
the shadow of the Atomic Age. Is his small output of verse concerning
these matters an indication that Watkins has little feeling for his own
time?

In answering this question, we should notice, first, that though
Watkins has not written many poems dealing with unfortunate social con-
ditions of our time, those he has written indicate a man deeply concerned.
His concern, however, is for the injustice and sorrow which blight the
individual. Thus his ballad, "The Collier," shows clearly the horror of
an economic situation which forces "Clever or clumsy, lad or lout" down
into the mine pits. And his "Sonnet (Pit-Boy)" shows the same distress
for conditions which bring individual suffering:

Harnessed to mines, who shall inherit wealth?
To whom, here praying, shall pasteurized milk bring health?
What horror of dawn shall hide our born disgrace?

Torn, with torn satchel, reared in grit and filth,
His misery shows a town taken by stealth,
And all the accusing heavens in that Welsh face.

When we turn to the question of why his war experiences have not
been drawn on as subjects for poetry by Watkins, it is interesting to
note what Watkins himself has said:

No poet is made by war, which is productive of no good. But a
poet's work may be potentiated by his experience of war, and of
suffering....The truest statements about war are made under one's
breath, and the most false on the public platform. Bad art and
false gods motivate war as much as national greed. That is why
a poet should write always from his own footprint, which, wherever
it is, if it is truthful, is at peace.  

When Oscar Williams brought together his anthology of war poems, therefore, he included, in his selections by Watkins, "Discoveries," "Music of Colours," "The Shooting of Werfel," and "The Spoils of War." Of these, only the last has any direct connection with the war experiences of its author. But this one poem is enough to illustrate, by the intensity of its expression, by the nightmare quality of its imagery, that Watkins was far from unmoved by the destruction and sorrow of his own time. "The Spoils of War" is concerned with the death in a bombing raid of a young mother who has left the shelter in order to find a pillow for her child. Watkins uses a rather curious image in this poem: the woman's life is represented by a shawl, and her death by the fact that it has become unpinned. "The world is weaned from this one dead by the thread of a shawl...," the poem begins. The second stanza emphasizes, in its almost demented style, the horror and stupidity of such deaths:

This pin, this point over and under the Bristol Channel's wailing,
Piercing the sky carried in the breast, flung to the maniac grin,
Of brains and shattered windows, a mad child sucks at her wall.

The very pavings on which she met her death cry out, with an insistence on the word crossed which indicates clearly in what category Watkins places this death.

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3See footnote 2.
And the pavings, crying they were crossed, ring out
In a skipping rope world of tomorrow's names and games,
That they were crossed, crossed, certainly crossed
by the same,
Same feet. O gag those echoes down, lest the blood-stains shout.

The last line, "Look on her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young," quoted from *The Duchess of Malfi* by John Webster, ends the poem on an appropriate note of sorrow and futility. In "Niobe," as in "The Spoils of War," Watkins is concerned with the sorrow of individuals:

- Bereavement has a life, a tapestry
- Begun and ended with a single thread,
- Whether upon the shore of Greece or Wales,
- Whether in London or in Nagasaki,
- A woman stands, pausing to count her dead.

Nor is Watkins unaware, as he writes in his quiet Welsh home, of the special perils of the modern world—a world which many have feared would bring its own time to a final destruction. As Watkins watches the soaring ravens, he contemplates man's condition:

- I watch, and feel the pulse of turning Earth
- Now, in the foreshortening time,
- And mark that power sublime
- Which makes the passing moment worth
- All unformed years lacking this present form.
- See, they return, riding both sea and storm.
- These they have overcome, but man,
- Seizing the blind stone ignorance flings,
- Himself can break this chain of wings
- And, aiming, maim the loom where life began.
- The immediate presence of that fear
- Brings distant ages near.
- Never let it be said that he,
- Despising his own intellect,
- Art and his whole Past Wrecked,
- And cast his planet's faith beneath the sea.
  ("Ode at the Spring Equinox")

When we recall that Watkins has said, "Suffering is a great teacher: we know nothing until we know that," we may conclude with

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certainty that Watkins knows well the problems and suffering of his own age in time. He has chosen, however, seldom to speak of these things openly, but to make them part of his "own footprint" in the sands of time.

iii. Religion

When the problems of the modern religious poet are to be discussed, perhaps the first question to be asked is: who exactly is a religious poet? Many critics have attempted to answer this question. Thomas Blackburn, for example, says:

...when the poet breaks through the speech of his everyday self, when he is surprised by a voice which is more profound than his own and which gathers his experience into a unity he has not yet achieved in his personal life, when...he is inspired, then the statement made is usually concerned with those powers which lie behind Man, indeed behind all the creatures of life, and are the concern of religion.¹

Charles Glicksberg has defined the best religious poets as those who "without benefit of dogma and without abandoning their faith, grapple with the tumultuous life of their age. Every poet who does this honestly, regardless of his views on theological issues, is to be considered 'religious'".² These definitions, though true enough in their way, would surely enlarge the field of religious poetry to include any serious writer.

Vincent Buckley has made a more specific and narrow definition of religious poetry. There are, he points out, three types of such work: first, the poetry of simple, personal devotion or of private devotional difficulties; second, the poetry of writers who are not believers in any

¹The Price of an Eye, p. 19.

orthodox creed, but who regard the world and whatever lies behind it with reverence; and third, the poetry of believers who abide by a definite Creed, though with awareness of its complexity and with no necessary limitations of their work because of this creed. Buckley adds that the poetry of the first type tends to be over-simplified in attitude and in sensibility, while that of the second type tends to lack the pressure of a consistent insight. In this paper, therefore, the term religious poetry will refer to poetry of the third type—the poetry of believers.

Is religious faith of this type a help or a hindrance to the poet who partakes of it? This problem has been discussed by Martin Turnell:

No one supposes that belief can be a substitute for talent, but given the talent, Christians have argued that a writer's creative ability will be nourished and strengthened, his range broadened and deepened by a firmly grounded system of beliefs. Unbelievers have maintained, with equal tenacity, that any form of belief is a hindrance to the writer, that so far from nourishing his creative ability it has the reverse effect: it warps and stunts his talent, acts as blinkers which restrict or obliterate his vision. Among those taking the latter view is Karl Shapiro. Pointing out that, in general, "churches are weak in esthetics and the glory of this life, while most religious poets...are weak in talent," he goes on to suggest a cause for this state of affairs: "The reason is not far to seek: the closer one approaches the mystical experience the more the world falls away, the closer the substance of the world comes to annihilation." The religious poet may, therefore, lose the sense of physical immediacy so

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4 Ibid., p. 55.
5 Poetry Now (London, 1956), p. 21
6 Beyond Criticism, p. 10.
vital to good poetry.

Charles Glicksberg stresses the existential nature of modern man's problems: the inability to find what is authentic in life and in the world, and especially the fear of death, born of the sense of alienation, of nothingness behind all of life. Is religious poetry possible under such circumstances? Yes, Glicksberg answers, if we mean religious poetry as an attempt to grapple with the life of our age; no, if we refer to orthodox religious beliefs. "The poet who tries to utilize Christian myths and Christian symbolism as a means of vitalizing his poetry is doomed to disappointment." Glicksberg adds, "The modern poet cannot solve his problem by coming to rest in God. He may, like Whitman, behold Nature as a living scroll of miracles, but he cannot attach himself to a pantheistic God or believe in the efficacy of prayer." Indeed, "no writer of our time who has been exposed to the teachings of Darwin, Freud, Devey, Russell, Carnap, and Einstein can hope to recapture the medieval intensity of faith in the supernatural."

Blackburn, on the other hand, indicates the necessity for a certain amount of religion in the modern poet:

I do not suggest for one moment that a good poet must be a doctrinaire Spiritualist, for example, or a Christian: God forbid. But I do believe that, for his work to have the necessary scope, he must realize that the human being, birth and death, are a mystery.

7 Literature and Religion, pp. 24-25.
8 Literature and Religion, pp. 72-73.
10 Literature and Religion, pp. 92-93.
11 The Price of an Eye, pp. 136-137.
And even Glicksberg admits that "though many writers continue to deny the reality of God, they cannot somehow refrain from dealing with him in some form or other." 12

For better or worse, however, some poets in our age are religious in the orthodox sense; and thus they may find themselves facing problems of a rather special nature.

One of the most obvious of the problems of the religious poet is that of his audience. Even granting the truth of Horace Gregory's statement that "the 1950's have permitted a rediscovery and renewed appreciation of religious literature," 13 the religious poet will find himself facing a motley audience composed of fellow believers--devout and half-hearted, aggressive atheists, passive agnostics, and those who have reverence without being in any sense orthodox. 14 In fact, as G. S. Fraser says,

...the poet today knows that when he insists on the literal truth of his Christian symbolism he will arouse an awkward resistance in many readers. This awareness may make his own tone a little awkward. It is one thing to write it in an age of faith, and another to write it in an age of respectful agnosticism. 15

Charles Glicksberg has noted that "today in particular the poet cannot depend upon a common background of spiritual values. That is one of the reasons why he feels so impoverished and why his utterances sound so ineffectual." 16 It is also true, of course, that the modern religious writer cannot depend on his audience's being familiar with either Biblical

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12 Literature and Religion, p. 67.
15 Poetry Now, p. 21.
16 Literature and Religion, pp. 92-93.
names and stories or with liturgical terms of the church.

Furthermore, the religious poet must avoid certain pitfalls. He must beware, first of all, of the didactic. As Amos Wilder points out, "Affirmation in art is properly implicit rather than explicit. The poet is rather an image-maker than a preacher, a celebrant than a teacher....the poet ministers to true belief and right conduct not by indoctrination or didactic, but by enabling us to see...."17

George Every warns of another danger to the religious artist: "Modern Christian art is compelled to make a detour to avoid the Christmas-card associations of painting and poetry about religion....Religious feeling has to be translated into terms of physical sensation if it is to be made real again...."18

A more serious danger to the religious poet is the possibility that his vision of a divinely created and divinely maintained world may tempt him to ignore or underrate the ugly, the horrible, the secular, or the evil. Stuart Holroyd cautions that "the poet who is unaware of evil and not concerned with the problem of sin can at best only apprehend a very small part of the truth. The great artist was always an uncompromising realist, drawing the whole world into himself, the ugly as well as the beautiful...."19 Yet there is a sense in which spiritual experience, 

17 Modern Poetry and the Christian Tradition, p. 279.
Quoted by Amos Wilder, Modern Poetry and the Christian Tradition, p. 81.
19 Emergence from Chaos (Boston, 1957), pp. 56-57
with its inner struggle, tension, restlessness, and aspiration, leads to
a severe shaking of the foundations upon which the lives of most men are
built. As Holroyd says, "The ground which hitherto felt so solid is
swept from beneath a man's feet, and the political and social world, the
world of petty desires and trade devoted to their satisfaction, becomes
unimportant and therefore unreal." There may be, then, in the work of
religious poets, less emphasis on political and social issues, for these
aspects of life pale in comparison with the intensity of the spiritual
quest.

In the end, the finest religious poetry occurs when "the writer's
whole outlook is informed by his beliefs, when we do not feel...that
intellectually held beliefs are either being imposed on experience from
without, or are only very imperfectly assimilated into the experience." Indeed, the poetry "that really comes home to modern readers who do not
share the beliefs it embodies, is that which extends beyond the particular
creed and personality of its author, which grows out of and embraces
general human experience." On the other hand, the poem is "a portion
of the world of experience as viewed and valued by a human being"; and therefore the religious poet must not only extend his vision until it
takes in all human experience, but he must do what is probably even more

20 Ibid., p. 27.
21 Martin Turnell, Modern Literature and Christian Faith
difficult—to clarify and make articulate the inner processes of his spiritual life.

The poetry of Vernon Watkins derives much of its distinctive quality from its roots in religion. A member of the Church of England since boyhood, Watkins shows his religious training, as well as his belief, in much of the subject matter and the imagery of his verse. As we might expect, Biblical subjects, from both Old and New Testaments, occur frequently:

The impulsive, pagan earth
Gave that proud hunter birth
From whose uplifted hell
The blood of Abel fell.

("The Death Bell")

...and his shut eyes hold heaven in their dark sheaf,
In whom the rainbow's covenant is fulfilled.

("Sonnet: Infant Noah")

The Incarnation is often celebrated by Watkins:

Hold fast the impatient bell
And let my soul have time
To count and ponder well
What steps he has to climb
To see what Simeon saw
And those three travelled kings,
Love that fulfils the law
Figured in limbs, not wings...

("The Death Bell")

...afterwards all acts are qualified
By knowledge of that interval of glory:
Music from heaven, the incomparable gift
Of God to man, in every infant's eyes
That vision which is ichor to the soul
Transmitted there by lightning majesty,
The replica, reborn, of Christian love.

("The Replica")
Christ as the true Adam appears in this stanza:

God rose from this,
Shook once the hewn foundations of the world,
Earthquakes, volcanoes, and the bell-like sea,
His marl-made Adam into chaos hurled,
Left grief a mammoth on the spiny scree;
Tied millstones round the neck of avarice,
Filled famine's baskets seven and twelve times full

Made for the false dove-sellers and scale-lovers a scourge of little cords...
("The Windows of Breath")

In "I, Centurion," Watkins captures both the proud tone of the Roman commander and his feeling of wonder and faith:

I myself was witness then
Of God's love revealed to men
Walking in flesh amongst mankind
Which gave their sight back to the blind.

For me, a witness, it were wrong
To praise the gifts of time in song.
Let others for long years sing praise;
I marvel to have seen two days
Whose likeness shall not be again.

I, Truth and obedience being my trade,
Hearing the voice even Death obeyed,
Was smitten then by hidden strings,
Seeing this last of underlings
Healed and made whole.

The crucifixion is treated in "The Room of Pity":

The room of pity, marked with murder's cross,
Danced in the worlds of reawakened tears
Sprung from grief's heart, emblems of utter loss..

Love climbed there sobbing, but this Nazarene
Leaned on the beams which raftered hopes and fears:
This was love's source, and this, grief's evergreen.

In other religious poems, Watkins makes use in subject and imagery of ideas taken from the church liturgy and tradition.
The Word shines still
Locked in dumb stone.

Of radiant love,
Given starlike without stint
By Father, Son, and Dove,
Take now the print
Which death shall not obliterate, nor time move.

Even as He fell
With sabachthani cries
To those three days in hell,
So must your eyes
Close, for three seconds now, to be made well.

("For a Christening")

That his beliefs concerning man's salvation are orthodox indeed is indicated in these lines from "The Death Bell":

Man in his mortal state
Can bear the heavy weight
Of earth and heaven and hell
Compounded in a bell
If he discern the glory
Of John's deep-thundered story
By which a thorn-crowned head
Sinking, to raise the dead,
Has pulled unbounded space
Down, by the weight of grace,
Whose deep-rung moment wins
Forgiveness of all sins.

Though resurrection's blast
Thrill the resounding nave
And call from niche and grave,
Where sunbeams fall aslant,
Each holy celebrant,
There is no temperate flight
Can raise mankind to light
Save where the font is laid.

And the idea of the Communion service is suggested in these lines:

Yet men to earth are bound,
To heats from which they grew.
They sift the stars who pound
The corn with leavening yeast
Till the whole bread is made;
And plenty crowns their feast,
Wine from a cellar's shade
Preserving all that's true.

("Bread and the Stars")
If Watkins occasionally verges on the didactic,

To praise where men most grieve,
To love where hate had been:
This I would wish on each;
No less the prophets teach.

("Revisited Waters")

he more often makes his point in verse as lightly-phrased and effective
as this stanza from "Trust Darkness":

Learn to lie fallow.
Trees naked or yellow
Endure through long winter
And ride every storm.

No love that fears night
Is fitting and right.
If you seek resurrection
Take root and grow strong.
No bond of affection is less than life long.

In "A Prayer" for his son, Watkins gives his ideas of courage:

Let him find strength to throw
Compromise to the winds
Though constancy forgo
All but his truest friends,
And patiently repair
The drift of broken vows,
Creating from despair
His Christ-appointed house...

And in "Prime Colours," Watkins says, "The upright man is always out of
fashion." This phrase, which sounds a bit prim, takes on its proper
significance when we note that the "upright man" is compared with
"the imprisoned school,/ Cramped, figured scribes, distorted by pos-
session..." Thus, the man who is upright is the man who is free from
rules and worldly possessions, free in thought and belief, free as Christ
was in contrast to the Scribes.
Thomas Blackburn says of Watkins that he "seems to have made some resolution of the warring opposites of flesh and spirit, time and eternity." That Watkins knows well the opposition of body and spirit can be seen in his "The Strangled Prayer," which ends with a plea for divine help:

Snatch up, untwist me, twelve-tongued Pentecost,  
For Nature makes me mortal in her bed.

But a resolution of flesh and spirit is illustrated in the sonnet, "Dust in the Balance." Though it begins with the question, "Why should pure spirit in ribs of bone be trussed?" its last lines contradict the idea of the body as unnecessary or evil:

Hearing those abstract senses mock the bone,  
My soul is like a lute when it is still,  
That played when mockers tore His cloak apart  
Who gave them all, but not His beating heart.

Of special interest among Watkins' religious poems are those which indicate something of his spiritual growth--of problems encountered and often solved. Though in "A Prayer against Time" he stresses his own good fortune in having a single, all-satisfying faith,

I have been luckier than  
All others in one thing,  
Devoted secret time  
To one love, one alone;  
Found then that dying man  
Exulting in new rhyme:  
The river standing,  
All but miracle gone.

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other verses suggest that there were difficult moments in his spiritual development. Coming again to the graveyard where Keats and Shelley are buried, he recalls a previous visit:

It was a moment when I still
Knew no remedy for time's ill,
Among the many or the few
No power effective to renew
Substance loved and treasured most
Seeming irreparably lost.

"Angel and Man" indicates that certain questions about life and death may never be answered to Watkins' complete satisfaction. When the man asks where the dead are now, the Angel responds:

They are gone to the root of the tree.

* * * * * * *

your ears are not attuned
To those sunk voices which the ground transfigures.
They are like lightning, or the time in sleep
Circling the earth from which the slow leaf breaks.
They do wake, in the murmur of the leaves.

But the man insists:

The leaves made that same sound when they were living.
But it was not their voices when they lived,
Nor is it now.

Still, the poem ends on a note of faith:

I accept this for my portion. Grief was theirs,
And grief, their lot; is likely to be mine.
Yet in the last, most solitary dark
There lives an equilibrium in the soul
Depending on forgiveness. Grant me this,
And I shall hold truth fast without remorse
Under the turning stars.

"The Exacting Ghost" indicates, too, that Watkins is well aware of how frail is our human vision of the life to come. Meeting in dreams a former friend, now dead, he cries:
You smiled. Your reassurance gave
My doubt its death, my hope its due.
I had always known beyond the grave,
I said, all would be well with you.

You fixed contracted, narrowing eyes
To challenge my instinctive sense.
The uncertainty of my surmise
Their penetration made intense.

'What right had you to know, what right
To arrogate so great a gift?'
I woke, and memory with the light
Brought back a weight I could not lift.

In "The Caryatids," Watkins compares his faith to the unfailing arms of the supporting pillars:

Yet the grave arms how strong,
Supporting, while seas broke,
The balanced urns of song
Under the lightning-stroke.

How should I pray? My prayer
Found in closed eyelids stands
While seawaves pierce night's air
And pound the unyielding sands.

Yet, looking on his sleeping daughter, "not yet six years old," Watkins cannot quell the anxiety any parent must recognize:

Like footprints on the sea,
How near is love to dread!

But Watkins' religious faith, on the whole, appears to have given him a satisfying interpretation of life. The evil in the world man for the most part has brought upon himself:

Fossil now and man
Speak of a death which was not here before.
It is man's fault if it is so:
His guilt has brought him low...
("Ode at the Spring Equinox")

Mysteries of creation, however--the presence on God's earth of hunter and prey, the necessity of death for all creatures--Watkins seems to bow to
as part of a divine scheme which man cannot always understand. Indeed, the quality of surrender is an important part of Watkins' belief:

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

"Time's Deathbed" explains this necessary surrender and its results.
When a spirit, presumably an angel, visits the poet's bedside, it gives this notice:

'Possess new time, possess
New time, or nothingness.'

That this "new time" is to be gained by death of selfhood is indicated in these lines:

Then sprang a sweat of fear,
For where soul thrust a spear
Blood rose immense,
The light was so intense
The shade so near.

When the poet exclaims, "For the firm pulse of days/ Was locked in my surrender," the spirit agrees:

Lie still. Your fist then broke
The hour-glass that has cursed
Man from the first
With superstition's cloak.

The final resolution of the problem of time, then, lies in man's surrender of self in religious faith. Watkins does not have much to say about the end of time--the last judgment--but is content to leave this matter to God:

Who questions at what age
The dead are raised? To assuage
The curious, vision smooths
The lids of age, and youth's.
("The Death Bell")
In his explanatory notes to "The Death Bell," Watkins states his beliefs clearly: "...unredeemed man, through acquisitiveness, wills his own perdition, but...redeemed man, falling through time deliberately, is raised by loss...the resurrection of the body is assured, not by the instinct of self-preservation, but by the moment of loss, of the whole man's recurrent willingness to lose himself to an act of love." 25

The immortality of the soul and, as Watkins has indicated, of the body as well, is a vital part of Watkins' faith, for it puts all else—earthly life, art, time, and nature—into proper perspective.

The mother with her child

exults in the joy she gave
Knowing that miracle, miracle to beget,
Springs like a star to her milk, is not for the grave.
("The Mother and Child")

Even the ancient "Nefertiti"

clasps with folded hands her hidden scroll,
Her eyes being set in death, being taught with joy to see
That radiant Master guard the stations of her soul.

The purely religious poems are not, however, the most satisfying of Watkins' work. Perhaps it is because religious experience is complex, deeply personal, and almost impossible to explain with any persuasion to others, that we note what G. S. Fraser has called "a certain vagueness of definition in some of the poems of Mr. Vernon Watkins." 26 And Thomas Blackburn has suggested that in such religious poems as "The Death Bell," the tone, though full of grandeur and not overly didactic, has the detached remoteness of a sermon. "The statement of 'The Death Bell' is

26 Poetry Now, p. 21
valid enough and so is its cold deliberate music; what I am not certain
about is Watkins' ability to take us with him into this poem."27 We can
admire and respect the religious verse of Watkins, but it is doubtful
that we can ever learn to love it.

What a difference there is when we turn to the poems in which
Watkins finds religious significance in nature! In these poems--"Ode to
more--imagery, diction, and ideas all are full of freshness and life.

Beyond this wall the blue sea; the sap from the root
Ascends where the woodpecker clings to the fir-tree's bark.
And here, out of sight of the sea, I hear his excited shout,
The exuberant, bright-crested bird resurrecting the dark.

Larks sing, in the deep, dense blue, above gorse and rocks,
Black specks. Light falls where they mount. A commotion
of wings
Rustles the furnace of thorns where blackbirds nest in
the thicket.
The shaft the birds fly from, the shade and the phoenix,
are Spring's.

("Birth and Morning")

After the winter solstice came
Ice and low flame,
The cockerel step by which the light
Shortened the sleep of earth and night.

And slowly as the days of Lent
Waxed and were spent,
Trees, birds and flowers all increased
In expectation of the feast.

Spring with such promise did abound
That the gemmed ground
Already showed in clustered grass
The printless light of unseen stars.

But now light grows where rays decline.
Now the crushed wine
Transfigures all, leaf, blossom, fruit,
By reference to the sacred root.

("Good Friday")

27The Price of an Eye, p. 130.
Perhaps Amos Wilder touches on the reason for the greater vitality and imaginative power of Watkins' nature poetry when he speaks of the modern Protestant poet's ability to bring to nature "not so much a tradition as a leaven." And perhaps, in the end, the truest statement about religious poetry and its writers is Holroyd's: "Art is not religious because it concerns itself with obviously religious subjects, but rather because the artist's attitude to life is a religious one." In this sense, every word written by Vernon Watkins is religious, demonstrating not only what it is to be a Christian in the twentieth century, but also giving new dimensions to the possibilities of the spiritual life of all men.

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29 Emergence from Chaos, p. 44.
CONCLUSION

The final estimate of the poetry of Vernon Watkins must rank it as the work of a consummate craftsman. In the elements of his style, in the ideas which form the basis for his poetry, and in the wedding of these two facets into a single whole, Watkins wins our highest admiration. At its best, his poetry deserves Blackburn's tribute:

...when he writes about the coast of his native Gower, Watkins is passionately involved with his poems and so they are deeply moving. A bird, a piece of weathered timber, any detail of the sea-margin which he has known for most of his life, gives the grit of fact to his imagination and enables him fully to embody his lofty conceptions, and bring them home to our senses as well as the brain. Given the loved and observed fact to work on, a storm or the debris of a ship-wreck, then perhaps more vividly than any other living poet Vernon Watkins can communicate the sense of a presence behind the phenomena of nature, something caught by hints and partial glimpses but never completely realised.¹

Adverse criticism of Watkins has, however, tended to emphasize two aspects of his poetry. The first of these is indicated by Winfield Townley Scott, in a review of Watkins' latest volume, Affinities. Speaking of one of the verses, he says:

It might have been written by a fairly talented contemporary of John Keats. What we have in Watkins's verse is the seamless style, the lovely rhyming, the beautifully modulated stanzas, and the literary allusions of the nineteenth-century romantics. It is all very able; and, perhaps because it is imported, we fail to question how much it emanates, as poetry should, from our own time.²

¹The Price of an Eye, pp. 130-131.
It certainly cannot be denied that the sense of being a voice of the
twentieth century, in its special nature and with its special problems,
is not a prominent aspect of Watkins' verse. However, when we note in
the poetry of another modern Christian references to "Miltown" and to the
election of "Ike," we may well remind ourselves how few years must pass
before these emanations from our own time will seem dated and obscure:

A more serious criticism of Watkins is reflected in the statements
of various critics. Don Geiger, in a review of Watkins' reading of his
verse for recording purposes, remarks on his ability to capture supple,
sensitive rhythms in his oral reading, but adds:

Watkins is...characteristic...in his emphasis on expressing
rhythmic surge at the expense of attitude, or drama. Probably
there is one overwhelming reason for this partial achievement
by most poets. The sound is the abstract dimension of the
poem—the poet can tuck into it snugly without risking personal
exposure.4

Blackburn has noted the same aspect of Watkins' poetry:

But Vernon Watkins may wish to keep himself out of his poetry.
His themes are often deeply apprehended both by emotion and intellect,
and I am sure that he has suffered for many of them and is only
rarely versifying a sympathetic idea. Nevertheless, whether he
is writing about God, or the sea, or Taliesin, the subject of the
poem is usually everything. Watkins very rarely communicates to
us any sense of the personal struggle which has led him as a man
to choose a particular theme.5

3 Robert Lowell, Life Studies (New York, 1959), quoted in
pp. 232-234.

4 "The Voice, the Poet, and the Poem," Poetry, CI, iv (Jan. 1963),
p. 278. Rev. of the record Vernon Watkins Reads His Works, CYP317,
Yale Series of Recorded Poets.

5 The Price of an Eye, p. 129.
He goes on to suggest that it is in the religious, most specifically Christian poetry that the lack of intimacy between Watkins and his reader is most felt. "There is a sense in which ideas wilt without the human being who utters them; and one of the things which distinguishes poetry from other kinds of writing is its capacity to communicate both the speaker and the statement which he is making," Blackburn reminds us. 6 In one of his letters to Watkins, Dylan Thomas also referred to the detached remoteness of some of Watkins' verse:

I don't ask you for vulgarity, though I miss it; I think I ask you for a little creative destruction, destructive creation.... it is a poem so obviously written in words; I want my sentimental blood....7

It cannot be denied that some of Watkins' poetry does show these qualities of reserve, of formality, and of a lack of emotion verging on coldness. They are not found in all his poems; they are certainly not found in the best poems. Yet they occur often enough to mark a significant number of Watkins' verses with their coolly intellectual coloring.

A partial conclusion, then, seems to be this. If Watkins is sometimes overlooked by critics, if he has failed so far to become widely popular with the poetry-reading public, it is not only because he writes on unfashionable subjects, nor because he is a Christian in an age when the problems of the dedicated religious man are not those which typify the times, nor even because he has failed, somewhat, to give us a sense of his own time in its history and struggles. Rather, it is because in a significant number of his poems he has withheld something of himself as too intimate to share. He has given us his skill, his gift with the

6 Ibid., p. 130.
7 Letters, p. 38.
grandeur of words, his impressive thoughts, and his exalted and dedicated conception of life, death, religion, time, nature, and art. In the words of one of his own poems, he has given us all, "but not his beating heart."

Still, no one who has studied Watkins' poetry can fail to regard its author with deep respect. For Watkins is a poet whose prime characteristic is integrity—a willingness to follow his particular Muse where it may take him. Being a man of deep faith, he cannot omit religion from his poetry, even though its inclusion may put him outside the mainstream of modern poetry. Being a man deeply affected by nature, he finds his most consistent inspiration there, though such a source may be unfashionable. Does such poetry, then, have any value for modern man, with his hurried skeptical, materialistic viewpoint? I believe that the answer is yes. If many of us have little contact with nature, in our urban society, Watkins can remind us of an ancient but ever powerful source of inspiration and beauty which we will ignore at our own loss. If many of us cannot share his religious beliefs, we can at least gain new insights into the whole problem of faith, whatever our particular gods may be. And, in the end, Watkins writes the way he must write, whether he is read or ignored, acclaimed or criticized. For his are the "Rewards of the Fountain":

Let the world offer what it will,  
Its bargains I refuse.  
Those it rewards are greedy still.  
I serve a stricter Muse.

She bears no treasure but the sands,  
No bounty but the sea's.  
The fountain falls on empty hands.  
She only gives to these.

The living water sings through her  
Whose eyes are fixed on stone.  
My strength is from the sepulchre  
Where time is overthrown.

If once I labour to possess  
A gift that is not hers,  
The more I gain in time, the less  
I triumph in the verse.
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