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**A Structural Analysis of
Dylan Thomas's
"The force that through the green
fuse drives the flower"**

Shigeharu Morita

0

Dylan Thomas's poetry is notorious for its "crabbedness". On the second thoughts, however, we shall find that under the mask of ambiguity there lies rigorous calculation, conscious or unconscious, by the writer himself. This calculation is the very master key for puzzling out the mysteries within his poems. And a poem in general cannot be a sheer mystery which will not accept any interpretations on the readers' side. As I pointed out in *OLR 15* seemingly deviant expressions might be, and often are, perfectly acceptable in the poetic structures.¹⁾ Here we can acquire no little significance in the structural analysis of poetry.

For all that, there seems to be a general tendency among the students of poetry to attach undue value to the "image" in comparison with the "structure". It is very difficult, indeed, to point out "what is crucially important in poetry". However, we might safely say that from the viewpoint of versification it is of the first-rate importance to create sharp and vivid "images" within the linguistic framework, or "structure".

This essay is the first exploration of a short poem by Dylan Thomas and is my own experiment of "structural poetics".²⁾ For methodology we shall chiefly follow Jakobsonian method again as in my preceding essay,³⁾ but I am sure our discussion will also provide practical support for the theory proposed by Leech (1965) or Sasaki (1971).⁴⁾

1

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.

And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

The force that drives the water through the rocks
Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams
Turns mine to wax.

And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins
How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.

The hand that whirls the water in the pool
Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind
Hauls my shroud sail.

And I am dumb to tell the hanging man
How of my clay is made the hangman's lime.

The lips of time leech to the fountain head;
Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood
Shall calm her sores.

And I am dumb to tell a weather's wind
How time has ticked a heaven round the stars.

And I am dumb to tell the lover's tomb
How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.

This poem was first published in 1933, when Thomas was only nineteen years old. Today because of its vivid images and perfect structures, it is regarded as one of his best poems. Stating its theme first, it is, I think, the "rotation" of life and death. Tanaka (1968: 11)⁵⁾ says in his discussion about Thomas's view of "life" and "death":

However, by thinking and fearing of death, he realized the mysteries of life all the better and thus he could feel its pleasure from the bottom of his heart. (tr. by S. M.)

We shall, then, have the same diagram as in Stanza I:

[Nature]

<i>P Equi</i>	{	D	{	1	<i>P S Equi</i>
&			2		
<i>S Cont</i>		E	{	3	<i>P S Equi</i>
			4		

[I] F { 5 } *S Equi*
 { 6 }

Verbal contrast is again clear-cut:

D (¹drives — ²Drives <<+>>) vs. E (³dries — ⁴Turns <<->>)

Continuity or uniformity is produced by the ingenious arrangement of similar sounds:

{	¹ drives — ² Drives — ³ dries
	/draivz/ /draivz/ /draiz/
{	¹ rocks — ⁴ wax — ⁶ sucks
	/-ɔks/ /-æks/ /-ʌks/
{	³ mouthng — ⁵ mouth — ⁶ mountain — ⁶ mouth
	/mauðɪŋ/ /mauθ/ /mauntɪn/ /mauθ/

<Stanza III>

The relation is mostly unchanged here, but special attention should be directed to the phrase “the hanging man”, which is to be linked up to “the lover’s tomb” in the final stanza. Through association with “a hanging Christ” it is foreshading a serious change—the introduction into a new world—in the following stanza. These circumstances might be illustrated below:

G	1 { The hand } { that } {whirls the water in the pool}
	2 { (the hand) } { (that) } {Stirs the quicksand}
H	3 { (the hand) } { that } {ropes the blowing wind}
	4 { (the hand) } { (that) } {Hauls my shroud sail}

And

I	5 { I am dumb to tell } { ——— }
	6 { ————— } { How }
	{ the hanging man the hangman’s lime is made of my clay }

And another diagram is like the following:

[Nature]

<i>P Equi</i>	{	G	{	1	<i>P S Equi</i>
&				2	
<i>S Cont</i>		H	{	3	<i>P S Equi</i>
				4	

[I]	I	{	5	<i>S Equi</i>
			6	

Contrastive verbs are:

G (¹whirls — ²Stirs <<+>>) vs. H (³ropes — ⁴Hauls <<->>)

Notice, furthermore, the affinity between the sounds such as:

{	¹ whirl — ² Stirs — ⁴ Hauls
	/-ə:l/ /-ə:z/ /-ɔ:lz/
	¹ hand — ² quicksand — ³ hand — ³ wind — ⁴ shroud —
	/hænd/ /-ænd/ /hænd/ /-nd/ /-d/
	⁵ hanging — ⁵ man — ⁶ hangman's
	/hæŋŋ/ /mæn/ /hæŋmæn/

We are now in a position to examine the last two stanzas:

<Stanza IV>

Remark, first and foremost, that the equivalence kept unchanged up to here is at last broken off in part. Here the role of an adverbial conjunction "but" is particularly important: namely, simultaneously with the changes from "the image of liquid (flowing)" to "the image of heaven", comes the conversion of the way of using punctuation¹¹⁾ and conjunction. Once the change is achieved, however, the conjunction "and" comes to life, which draws in us to the serenity in the new-born world. Outlines might be shown as follows:

J	1 {The lips of time}	}	leech to the fountain head}
	2 {Love	}	} {drips

but

K	3 {the fallen blood}	}	} {Shall calm her sores}
---	----------------------	---	--------------------------

And

L	4 {I am dumb to tell}	}	} {_____}
	5 { _____	}	} {How}
			} {a weater's wind
			} {time has ticked a heaven round the stars}

Notice the asymmetry in the diagram below:

[Nature]

<i>P Equi</i>	{	J	{	1	<i>P S Equi</i>
&				2	
<i>S Cont</i>		K	{	3	

[I] L { 4 / 5 } *S Equi*

We cannot find the reiterative use of the same or similar sounds any more. There is no remarkable condensation of sounds, which has been displayed throughout the former stanzas — I <¹drives—²Drives>, II <¹drives—²Drives—³dries> and III <¹whirls—²Stirs> (/ai/-/ai/-/ai/-/ai/-/ai/-/ə:-z/-/ə:-z/). The point is again that this change corresponds to the liquidation of the strain or suspense in the poem.

All these things ensure to us that in this poem factors of various kinds are related to the development of the theme. A verb “calm” and even such expressions as “Love drips” or “fallen blood” seem to function as the preliminaries to the undoing of the compressive situation—to the introduction into a silent, anti-time world.

<Stanza V>

Getting out of the compressive and strained circumstances, Thomas has now entered into the deep silence. This is symbolized by the syntactic technique such as the elimination of the first three lines of this stanza. And a “crooked worm” crawls about as if it were symbolizing the continuous life cycles of “death” and “life”.¹²⁾ Thus consider the following:

And

M	1 { I am dumb to tell } { — } { the lover's tomb }
2 {	_____ } { How } { at my sheet }
	{ (where the crooked worm goes) }
	{ the same crooked worm goes }

And finally:

[I] M { 1 / 2 } *S Equi*

The investigations sketched out here tell us much about why the technique of "repetition" could be one of the most important and indispensable techniques by Dylan Thomas. It is a striking technique dominating all over the poem beyond the confines of stanzas. Thomas is, in effect, allowed to say much more than great talkers by repeatedly falling into silence ("And I am dumb to tell ...").¹³⁾

3

Looking at this poem from the viewpoint of the rhyming structure, it will come out that there is no rhyming in the strict sense of the word. But here again the remarkable similarities in sounds at the ends of the lines might be another manifestation of the main technique "repetition".

Let us make some observation of the rhyming structure (in its broadest sense) of each stanza.

<Stanza I>

Take notice of the alternation of [ə] (Schwa) and [z] (Alveolar Fricative):

flower,	trees,	destroyer,	rose,	fever
/ə/	/z/	/ə/	/z/	/ə/

<Stanza II>

In the same way the alternate appearance of the sounds—[ks] (Velar Stop + Alveolar Fricative) and [z] (Alveolar Fricative), may be of particular interest:

rocks,	streams,	wax,	veins,	sucks
/ks/	/z/	/ks/	/z/	/ks/

<Stanza III>

Here [l] (Alveolar Lateral) appears twice; moreover, the two sounds, [n] (Alveolar Nasal) and [m] (Bilabial Nasal), are phonetically alike. Also, be it noted, that [d] (Alveolar Stop) is linking with [d] in the next stanza, [n] and [m] with [m] in the final stanza:

pool, wind, sail, man, lime
 /l/ /d/ /l/ /n/ /m/

<Stanza IV>

Our attention should be focused again upon the fact that the phonetically similar sounds, [d] and [z], are reiteratively employed. We must also refer to the conversion of image, of which we have mentioned before. This time the uniformity of sounds is a prelude to the world of silence and eternity:¹⁴⁾

head, blood, sores, wind, stars
 /d/ /d/ /z/ /d/ /z/

<Stanza V>

Here are no sounds other than [m]. Other possibilities are completely excluded:

tomb, worm
 /m/ /m/

We are, thus, supplied with an objective clue to ascertain the close relationship between “rhyme” and “theme”. When our thoughts run on the importance of these two factors in a poem, we are all the more confirmed in our belief that this poem is a product rigidly calculated by a genius “Dylan Thomas”.

4

Now, most scholars will agree that “ambiguity” in Thomas’s poems is due to his bold and ingenious use of images. Since Thomas himself declares that he intends to say two things in a word, four things in two words,¹⁵⁾ “ambiguity” is, in a way, a natural consequence. Tanaka (1968: 11) explains:

And besides, ambiguity increases all the more because images are, in most cases, used as “symbols”, not as “metaphors” where he is concerned. “Metaphors” are helpful to clarify the meaning, never cause interpretive complexity; on the other hand, since the meaning of “symbols” depends upon the reader’s understanding, he cannot determine, on one occasion, what they symbolize and

cannot have enough confidence in his own interpretation on another occasion.

(tr. by S.M.)

In these circumstances I may be permitted if I cannot have the fullest confidence in my own interpretation. I only wish to offer a few words on the subtle relationship between "image" and "theme", enumerating the images repeatedly appearing in each stanza.

<Stanza I>

Here the growth of plants is described by way of the image of "explosion". Compare the following sets:

«"plants" words»

«"explosion" words»

{	¹ flower — ¹ green fuse —	{	¹ force — ¹ drives — ² Drives
	² green age — ³ roots of trees —		³ blasts — ⁴ destroyer —
	⁵ rose		⁵ (crooked) — ⁶ (bent) — ⁶ fever

<Stanza II>

In this stanza the "explosion" image is carried along through various kinds of "liquid" flowing. The following are all "liquid" words:

{	¹ water — ² blood — ³ mouthing streams — ⁴ wax — ⁵ (mouth) —
	⁵ veins — ⁶ mountain spring — ⁶ (mouth) — ⁶ (sucks)

<Stanza III>

Again comes the "liquid" image:

¹(whirls) — ¹water — ¹pool — ²(quicksand) — ⁴(sail)

<Stanza IV>

There is an important change here — the change from the "liquid" image, which is no longer a dynamic "flow", but a quiet and silent "stream", to the image of "heaven", "anti-time" and "eternity". Note this "change" in the following list:

{	¹ (lips) — ¹ (leech) — ¹ fountain — ² drips — ³ blood;
	³ (calm) — ⁴ weather's wind — ⁵ time — ⁵ ticked — ⁵ heaven — ⁵ stars

<Stanza V>

This is the stanza which synthesizes the whole poem and induces us to return to the head of the poem. Such a formula as "death

image" (lover's tomb) + "life image" (the same crooked worm) ⇒ "invitation to eternity", is his speciality. And this skill, which might be called "the technique of reversing", is the very dialectic (thesis (+) → antithesis (-) → synthesis (+)) of Dylan Thomas himself.¹⁶⁾

5

The aim of this essay has not been to make a thorough examination of the present poem but only to discuss it in the structural aspect. Perhaps more satisfactory claim might be derived when further researches are made in connection with other aspects not discussed here and, of course, with other works of Thomas as well. However, it might not be entirely misdirected to conclude the present analysis by saying that: we could find out that the poem which seemed to be a deluge of images was, in fact, under the deep-laid calculation by the poet, and that the correlative structures among the syntactic, semantic and phonetic elements were the special construction designated as a "vehicle" by which the theme, or poet's intention was to be carried.

Notes

- 1) Emily Dickinson's poem was dealt with in it in an attempt to probe into the close relationship between "meaning" and "structure" in poetry. See further *OLR*, 15, 15-25.
- 2) Some linguists reject the term. Ruwet (1972: 210), for example, argues: "En second lieu, il serait sans doute souhaitable renoncer à baptiser nos premiers essais d'étude rigoureuse de la poésie du nom de poétique structurale." See Nicolas Ruwet, 1972, *Langage, musique, poésie* (Paris: Edition du Seuil).
- 3) Cf. note 1.
- 4) In my master thesis I have made a brief consideration about their methodology. Cf. Geoffrey Leech, 1965, "This bread I break—language and interpretation," *A Review of English Literature*, 6, 66-75.; Tatsu Sasaki, 1971, *Kindaieishi no hyogen*, Revised edition (Tokyo: Kenkyusha).
- 5) Seitaro Tanaka, 1968, *Dylan Thomas kenkyu* (Tokyo: Kenkyusha).
- 6) G.S. Fraser, 1957, *Dylan Thomas* (London: Longmans), p.40, quoted in Clark Emery, 1962, *The World of Dylan Thomas* (Florida: University of Miami Press), p.270.

- 7) Cf. Emery (1962: 269).
- 8) For this notion the following articles have been consulted here: Roman Jakobson, 1960, "Linguistics and Poetics," *Style in Language*, ed. T. A. Sebeok (Massachusetts: The MIT Press); Samuel R. Levin, 1962, *Linguistic Structures in Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton); Nicolas Ruwet, 1963, "L'analyse structurale de la poésie," *Linguistics*, 2, 38-59.
- 9) On the shifting of "through the green fuse" and the transformation of "the crooked rose", see Ruwet (1963: 46-7). Ruwet insists: "Pour rendre clair le jeu des couplages, nous introduirons certaines modifications dans le texte, qui consistent principalement à redresser les inversions, et à restituer des mots 'sousentendus.'" (p.46) The rest to follow this. Our diagram, however, includes not only syntactic operation but, so to speak, "psychological" one as in the case of "mouth" (cf. note 10). Although I may invite the criticism that my discussion is in a bad confusion among syntax, semantics and psychology, it is off the mark, obviously. For our purpose is to give equivalent sets as clearly as possible, with parentheses if necessary, not to elucidate what is called "derivational history" in the purely syntactic way.
- 10) In this case the parenthesized "mouth" is, as it were, "a psychological trace" of the preceding "mouth" (verb). This noun "mouth", which retains, of course, the verbal function corresponding to "suck", is paired up with "the same mouth sucks" in the next line.
- 11) Differing from the punctuation in the first three stanzas—a semicolon in the middle of the second line; periods at the ends of the third and the fifth lines—, the fourth stanza has a semicolon in the first line, a comma plus an adversative "but" in the middle of the second line and periods at the ends of the third and the fifth lines. I think this modification in the punctuation has something to do with the fact that there is "a great change" in the second line. Cf. also §4.
- 12) By the way, "the same" and "crooked" in the strings "the same crooked worm" are linked up with "the same wintry fever" and "the crooked rose" in the first stanza, respectively. This technique heightens the effect of "rotation". Cf. also Emery (1962: 272).
- 13) We should also attend to the repetition of "how". It appears in four stanzas out of five, and in the same pattern of "how + preposition + noun" except the fourth stanza.
- 14) [d] (Alveolar Stop) and [z] (Alveolar Fricative) have theoretically the same "points of articulation". At the same time there is little difference between the two sounds with respect to "the manner of articulation"

(the condition of the stricture in the vocal tract). And so, we do not feel the insertion of heterogeneous sounds in the sequence of /d-d-z-d-z/.

15) Cf. Tanaka (1968: 240).

16) Cf. Tanaka (1968: 11).