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Dylan Thomas's Early Works and Modernism by Shigetada Narita

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The First World War, in which most of the major powers in the world were involved, broke out in 1914, when the old century moved into the new one and the paradigm of the spirit of the times and social backgrounds was changing radically. After all we can say gigantic modern capitalist systems, technological skills and highly advanced information services have been developed since then and still keep leading people to 'even more serious crises'. We already experienced the Second World War. I want to reconsider Modernism and Dylan Thomas's works in the early twentieth century to search for a creative literary expression to live through crises.

In Chapter I, I describe that even though many scholars confess the difficulties of defining of Modernism, they generally agree that it consists of multiplex cultural movements in a wide range of human activities responding to the crises of modernization. Viewed in this light, I can discover the three fundamental elements of Modernism in literature: the subversion of the existing meaning (value) in the manner of Husserl's phenomenological method; the dissipation of the subject in the way of Freud's theory on the structure of unconsciousness; the materiality and autonomy of language because of Saussure's linguistic structural study. So, I suggest that Husserl, Freud and Saussure are the precursors of Modernism. They are not literary figures, but influential pioneers who share a sense of Modernism to change the world drastically.

In Chapter II, I point out that James Joyce and T.S. Eliot are typical modernist writers with homogeneous talents in sensibility of language use which I designate as the three elements mentioned above. There are many examples of this modernistic use of language in Joyce's *Ulysses* and Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Considering the literary backgrounds of Dylan Thomas generally, I suggest that Thomas's whole works can be divided into two periods: the early one 1933-1939 and the late one 1940-1953. And I observe his early works in the history of English poetry from Shakespeare to Joyce and Eliot mainly from the points of view of sea-images and the modernistic ways of using language.

After these observations, I conclude that Thomas makes full use of Modernist techniques of language, which is prominently reflected in his various rhetorical devices and wordplay. From this point he can be called a modernist. There is evidence in plenty to show that his early poems have excessive complexity of expression with many puzzling images and are extremely hard to analyze. Especially, in his poem "I, in my intricate image, stride on two levels" and "Altarwise Sonnets", which are closely related with his fiction "The Orchards", Thomas is fighting hardest with the wor(l)d (value) in his life. He begins to write these works without having clear themes in his mind. As a result, he tried to create a language system without referential function. In this point he has a strong interest in breaking through a typical modernist attitude of looking for order and form.

In Chapter III, I consider the landscape (topography) and the body (corporeality) in his early prose, comparing an autobiographical and retrospective fiction, "The Peaches" with a visionary and mysterious fiction, "The Orchards". There are two peculiar tendencies in his early works, both of poems and fictions: one is to search for non-referential words, and the other is to combine the words with his unique

topography and corporeality. In English literature in the Age of High Modernism, few poets apart from Thomas had a strong interest to unite words with the landscape and the body. This way of writing is reflected in his textuality in the story “The Peaches”. In this respect his way of seeing things and thinking will be connected with Merleau-Ponty’s thoughts on the body as John Goodby points out. In this sense Thomas is not only a modernist or a surrealist, but also a poet with energy to live and struggle to unite particulars and universals. What is most important and valuable in Thomas’s early works is to continue struggling to connect the world, words and the body, looking for a new way to express a new meaning. In his own words, he realizes the differences between *literary* texts and *literal* texts and tries to link both. He already felt the crises we are facing now almost a hundred years ago, sharing contemporarily philosophical, psychological, and linguistic concerns with Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Jean-Jacques Lecercle, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In *New Verse* a magazine issued in 1934, Thomas’s answers to a questionnaire addressed to its contributors were published: Do you intend your poetry to be useful to yourself or others?

He answered as follows:

To both. Poetry is the rhythmic, inevitably narrative, movement from an overclothed blindness to a naked vision that depends in its intensity on the strength of the labour put into the creation of the poetry. My poetry is, or should be, useful to me for one reason : it is the record of my individual struggle from darkness towards some measure of light, and what of the individual struggle is still to come benefits by the sight and knowledge of the faults and fewer merits in that concrete record. My poetry is, or should be, useful to others for its individual recording of that same struggle with which they are necessarily acquainted.

(FitzGibbon, 161-162)*

It seems fair to say that this comment of his own is proper for my conclusion at present. He tries to acquire universals “to express the causes and forces which are the same in all men” (FitzGibbon, 162). However, I need much more observation of his late works to learn the result of his struggle.

*FitzGibbon, Constantine. *The Life of Dylan Thomas*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1975.)