

SYMMETRY AND ICONICITY IN THE LANGUAGE OF THE FIRST OF DYLAN THOMAS'S *ALTARWISE BY OWLLIGHT SONNETS*

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Abstract: *It is not unusual to find symmetry in verbal art forms particularly in poetry. In the first of Dylan Thomas's *Altarwise by Owllight sonnets* there is much symmetry and parallelism of syntax. A feature of the poem's syntax is also iconic. To demonstrate this involves looking at parallelism of the lexical structure for keys to the coreferentiality of the subjects of the inner two sentences which are symmetrically arranged in the sonnet, and then determining the likely reference of those noun phases.*

The stanzaic structure of sonnets is not symmetrical in the bilateral sense, that is, there exists no axis of symmetry on either side of which a feature of its structure is a mirror image of that on the other. The Petrarchan sonnet is divided into an octave and sestet, (an eight line stanza and a six line stanza) and the Shakespearian sonnet divides into three quatrains (four line stanzas) and a couplet (two line stanza). The octave of the Petrarchan form shows parallelism and symmetry in its rhyme scheme but only parallelism in the rhyme scheme of its sestet. The octave runs *abbaabba* which is doubly symmetrical.

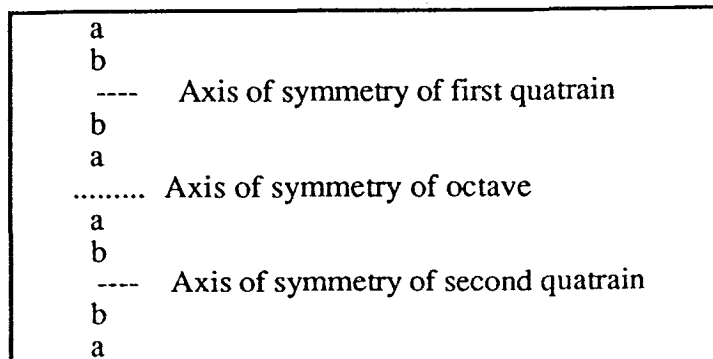


Figure 1: Axes of bilateral symmetry in the rhyme scheme of the octave of a Petrarchan sonnet.

Each quatrain is symmetrical about the axis of its second and third lines and the octave is again symmetrical about the axis of its fourth and fifth lines. The sestet rhyme scheme runs *cdecde*, i.e., has parallelism about a location between its third and fourth lines. What is the nature of such a location? It appears to be the equivalent for parallel structures of the term axis in the case of symmetrical structures.

Where, in the case of symmetrical structures, there is always an axis or point of symmetry, there is not always a single point in the case of parallel structure since parallel structures can be separated by intervening structure which does not participate in parallelism. So let us take it that if two structures are parallel, then in the case of one and two dimensional structures, each has extremities at which the parallel structure begins and ends. We can call these the left hand point and the right hand point. For there to be parallelism at all there must be at least two such structures. Let us suppose that we have two parallel structures *A* and *B*. For simplicity of exposition let us suppose that *A* and *B* are in either one or two dimensions, they are the same actual size, and that *A* is to the left of *B*. The parallelism lies in the property that if we suppose *A* and *B* to be transparent in all but their parallels to each other, then if *A* is moved to the right so that its extremities are moved over the corresponding extremities of *B* then the structural parallels of *A* will occlude those of *B*. Let us term any point by which *A* can be slid over *B* so that the point on *A* occludes the point at the similar point on *B* as a slide point. Such an account suggests that parallelism exists between two structures *A* and *B* if is a vector which allows *A* to be slide over *B* (or *B* over *A*) such that slide points on *A* occlude the equivalent slide points on *B*. Another way to look at it is this; in the case of a symmetrical linear (or two dimensional) structure you have a sequence on one side of an axis or point of symmetry and the reverse sequence on the other side. In the case of parallel structure the difference is that the sequence is not in the reverse sequence but in the same sequence. Take, for example, the sequence *A B C* followed by *A B C*. It makes sense to talk about the locations at which the sequence begins to repeat itself and at which it ends. This is a pair of slide points such that if one reversed the sequence or structure between them then the left hand slide point of one and the right hand slide point of the other would coincide and would be a point or axis of symmetry.

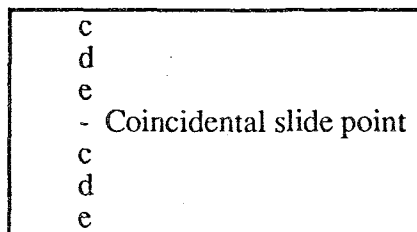


Figure 2: Coincidental slide point in the rhyme scheme of the sestet of a Petrarchan sonnet.

The rhyme scheme of the Shakespearian sonnet conversely shows parallelism in the three quatrains which rhyme *abab*, and symmetry in the final couplet which rhymes *aa*. Both the sonnet forms used traditionally in English literature therefore have, at least in their rhyme schemes, both structural bilateral symmetry and parallelism.

There is room for more of both symmetry and parallelism in other aspects of a sonnet's linguistic form although this would not be traditional. For example, a fourteen line verse form could be symmetrical for some structural parameter about an axis between the seventh and eighth lines. Dylan Thomas's poem *Altarwise by Owllight* is a fourteen line poem; the first of a sequence of such poems. Since sonnets have fourteen lines and often come in sequences it may be examined for other features sonnet form.

Altarwise by owl-light in the half-way house
The gentleman lay graveward with his furies;
Abaddon in the hangnail cracked from Adam,
And, from his fork, a dog among the fairies,

The atlas-eater with a jaw for news,
Bit out the mandrakes with to-morrow's scream.
Then, penny-eyed, that gentleman of wounds,
Old cock from nowheres and the heaven's egg,

With bones unbuttoned to the half-way winds,
Hatched from the windy salvage on one leg,
Scraped at my cradle in a walking word

That night of time under the Christward shelter:
I am the long world's gentleman, he said,
And share my bed with Capricorn and Cancer.

English sonnets are usually in iambic pentameter. So each line should contain ten syllables. The opening quatrain of *Altarwise by Owllight* has eleven syllables to a line and only after this settles into the traditional ten syllable line until line 12 which is again eleven syllables long, line 13 which is ten syllables long, and line 14 which is eleven syllables long. But what seems like an opening quatrain in terms of the parallel (but unorthodox) syllable length does not have a traditional Shakespearian quatrain's rhyme scheme nor is it, in its rhyme scheme, the first four lines of the octave of Petrarchan form. Instead only a half rhyme connects lines two and four and the rhyme scheme as a whole does not conform to any traditional pattern. Nor is the metre iambic since the poem opens with a heavily accented syllable and the rhythm is without traditional metre until the last line which is in iambic pentameter line save for the additional syllable at the line's end.

From these opening observations it is clear that *Altarwise by Owllight* is not a traditional sonnet and therefore requires to have its linguistic structures examined more closely to see what if any alternative linguistic patterning Thomas might be using. It appears that in the place of the traditional patterning of symmetry and parallelism in the rhyme scheme, Thomas has instead created symmetry and parallelism in the syntactic and lexical structures of the poem.

Altarwise by Owllight consists of four sentences. The first two lines and last two lines are each sentences although the punctuation is not unequivocal there being a semi-colon at the end of line two and a colon at the end of line 12. But an analysis of the syntax will show that these are to be read as sentence boundaries. The outer

two sentences therefore form a symmetrical pair of two lines each, at the beginning and end of the poem.

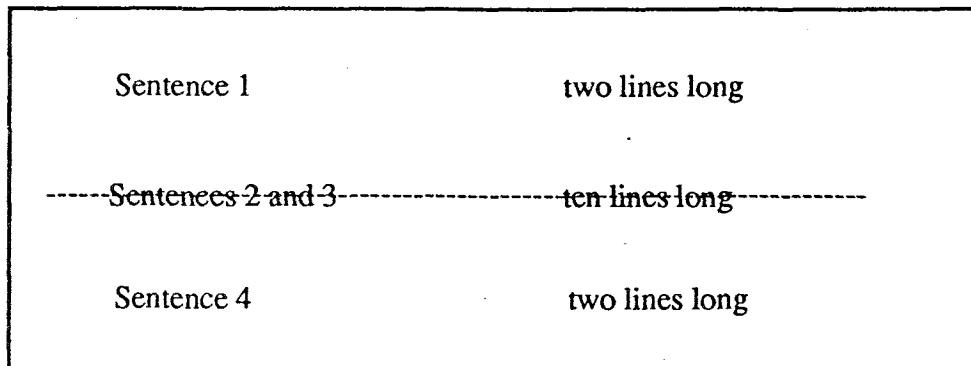


Figure 3: Bilateral symmetry of first and last sentences in terms of line length.

The remaining ten lines consist of two sentences, their boundary being signalled by the full stop at the end of line six. The full stop therefore comes close to making an axis of symmetry but misses by one line. The symmetry is that there is a short sentence followed by a long sentence on one side of the full stop while the reverse pattern exists on the other side of the stop. However there is more significant symmetry in the syntax of the two inner sentences than just their relative size.

If we look at the second sentence it has three coordinated noun phrases as the subjects of the verb bit. They are Abandon in the hangnail cracked from Adam and a dog among the fairies and the atlas eater with a jaw for news. The third sentence also has three coordinated noun phrases as subject of the verbs hatched and scraped. They are that gentleman of wounds, old cock from nowheres and the heaven's egg with bones unbuttoned to the half way winds. This gives us only parallel and not symmetrical structure. Symmetry of structure must be sought in the way the coordination is accomplished. Normally in coordinating more than two noun phrases, asyndetic coordination is employed between all but the last pair of conjuncts where syndetic coordination is employed. That is the pattern in the third sentence but not the second where the pattern is reversed. In the second sentence and is placed between the first pair of conjuncts and a comma between the second pair. So there is syntactic symmetry on the axis of the full stop between the subjects of the second and third sentences of the poem.

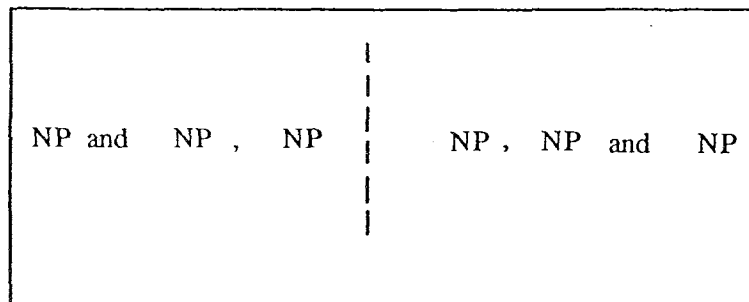


Figure 4: Bilateral symmetry in the structure of the subjects of sentences 2 and 3.

A case can now be made for this particular structure being iconic. An icon differs from a symbol in that the relationship between an icon's form and meaning is not wholly arbitrary. For example, the meaning of arrow signs which look like aircraft on traffic signs telling travellers the way to an airport are iconic in two senses. First the arrowlike direction of the aeroplane is spatially indicative of the direction one should follow to reach the airport and the outline of the aircraft actually represents an aircraft. A sign which read *This way to the airport* is non iconic in that none of its linguistic symbols by virtue of their sounds represent aircraft or directions. It is a matter of convention that they do. Icons are also, in part, conventional but never wholly.

While structural parallelism is common, syntactic symmetry is not. Syntactic iconicity is even more unusual. To show that these two sets of subjects are iconic it is necessary to show that they can be read as coreferential and that their reference allows them to be read iconically. To show that we need first to look first at another feature of structural parallelism, the preponderance of compound words in the poem. The poem alerts the reader to the significance of compounding by beginning the poem with the compound adverb *altarwise*. This is a nonce form which is not available in anyone's lexicon, i.e., is unlexicalised, and so it must be parsed and interpreted. Parsing of compounds is sometimes possible by rule but root compounds of which this is one are not parseable by rule. Therefore they must be parsed by guess-work, for example, by analogy with other compounds which look similar. So we might turn to *streetwise* "wise about matters pertaining to the street" or *clockwise* "in the direction of a clock" both of which seem plausible analogues. So "wise about matters pertaining to the altar" and "in the direction of an altar" are plausible glosses.

The next compound, *owl-light*, is also not a lexicalised one and has the additional problem that it is hard to think of a plausible analogous compound reading. None of *streetlight* "light for street", *nightlight* "light one puts on at night", *moonlight*, "the light of the moon" provides a plausible analogous reading and so a reader must to construct one *de novo*. A plausible possibility is "light by which owls fly". We are aided a little here by the fact that by *owllight* is a prepositional phrase in a set of three adverbial modifiers, in the half-way house being the last. If we read by *owllight* as "by night" then we have, in order, an adverbial of manner followed by one of time followed by one of place.

The last compound in line one is *half-way house*. *Half-way* is lexicalised. It normally refers to locations in space but can also refer to locations in time. We must therefore suppose that the house is midway between two other locations in either time or space. Just which axis the house is on remains vague. But again some kind of symmetry is being hinted at. In line two, having been confronted with compounds which were difficult to interpret, we come up against a fully lexicalised compound in *gentleman*. A wary reader might now wish to parse and interpret this rather than accept the lexicalised reading. If one did, then the literal reading of adjective followed by noun makes this a "man who is gentle". The next compound, *hangnail*, is again a lexicalised one but since it is hard to read with its lexicalised meaning of "split fingernail" it is plausible to parse and interpret this compound too to read something like "nail for hanging" or "nail which hangs". *Atlas eater* is not a lexicalised compound but eat with its agentive suffix provides a preferred reading of "one who eats atlases". *Penny-eyed* is again unlexicalised. Plausible

readings are "with eyes like pennies" or, if one is aware of the old custom of placing pennies on the eyes of the dead, "with pennies on the eyes".

At this point in the poem novel compounding ceases, the only compounds which appear later being ones which are already familiar such as gentleman and half-way, or fully lexicalised ones such as nowheres for which it is very hard to find a non-lexicalised gloss.

We are now in position to examine a number of the noun phrases of the poem for their meaning and reference. The poem deals with a gentleman who appears in the first sentence, the third sentence and the last. In his first appearance he is given the definite article and so the reader can assume that the identity of the gentleman is known. On second mention in the third sentence a demonstrative determiner is used. The preferred reading therefore makes this the same gentleman as the one in the first sentence. This second mention of gentleman is the first of three coordinated noun phrases in the third sentence. We have therefore determined that the most plausible reading is for the three gentlemen to be coreferential, i.e., the same gentleman.

Who is this gentleman? He ascribes to himself two attributes in the last sentence. He is the long world's gentleman and shares his bed with Capricorn and Cancer. The world is only literally long in time. Taken at face value this gentleman has been present for the length of the duration of the world. Sharing one's bed with Capricorn and Cancer is possible in two ways, either if one sleeps covering the heavens in which these are astrological signs or if one sleeps surrounding the earth as the tropics of Capricorn and Cancer do. On both readings of the latter attribute and also on the reading of the former the gentleman is a supernatural figure. Yet in the third sentence he has wounds and is penny-eyed. If the wounds were fatal then that would provide support for the reading of penny-eyed as a reference to death. In the first sentence he is facing in the direction of an altar or wise to the ways of altars which are themselves places of sacrifice. He is in a place which might be half way through time or space and is lying facing the grave with his furies which are avenging spirits of guilt.

It seems that the gentleman, gentle man, moves from facing death, to dying of his wounds, to cosmic and supernatural being through his three mentions in the poem.

We have crucifixion imagery in the references to nails, to screams, to wind, to one leg all of which makes identification of the gentleman with Christ likely. Note that we have three mentions of Christ, the gentleman, and, as incarnation, Christ is one of the trinity.

Turning now to the noun phrases which form the subjects of sentences three and four, in general two possible readings are available to coordinated noun phrases; either they are coreferential or not. For example, we might take three noun phrases such as in the following sentence: Elizabeth of Glames, the Queenmother and the grandmother of The Duke of Cornwall went to Ascot. In a case such as this there is nothing in the linguistic properties of the sentence which tells us whether the three noun phrases are coreferential or not. For that we require pragmatic interpretation. It happens that at the time of writing, the three are uniquely determined to be the same person. There is only one Elizabeth of Glames who happens also to be

the Queenmother and grandmother to the Duke of Cornwall (who also happens to be the Prince of Wales). But it need not be so.

And it need not be so in either sentence two or three that the three coordinated noun phrases are coreferential. The pronoun *he* in sentence four must normally have a singular male noun phrase antecedent and that can be found in that gentleman. But since the pronoun *he* is masculine and the other coordinate two noun phrases in sentence three appear to be neuter, it seems more likely that they are non-referential. Coreferentiality is only possible if the nonhuman noun phrases are appellations which might be given to that gentleman of wounds.

A parallel pattern is present in the coordinated subjects of sentence two. There Abandon, the angel of the hell, might be taken to be human; but dog is not and atlas eater might not be a human noun phrase either. So are there possible readings of the non-human noun phrases which would make it possible for them to be coreferential with the Christ figure represented by the gentleman? If we look at sentence three, old cock from nowheres might be interpreted as coreferential with Christ on the reading that nowhere only existed at the beginning of time and Christ was there at the beginning in the sense of the opening of John's Gospel, "in the beginning was the word". Taken that way we also get a coreferential reading with the walking word. (The crowing cock also belongs with the other crucifixion imagery.) The heaven's egg can be read as coreferential, on the reading that Christ was the son of God, the offspring of heaven, heaven's egg.

So it is plausible to read all three coordinated noun phrases in sentence three as being coreferential and referring to Christ. On that reading the syntactic pattern of the three coordinated noun phrases shown earlier to exhibit parallelism and symmetry is also iconic since it is a representation in the syntax of a trinity as well as referring to one, i.e., a three in one, three noun phrases in one subject and representing three persons who are one.

Can the same case be made for sentence two? Certainly the fact that it has three coordinated noun phrase subjects is, in this strongly trinitarian context symbolic but it is more difficult to show that it is directly iconic since it is not as easy to show that all three noun phrases could refer to Christ. The third conjunct is not difficult to interpret as referring to Christ. An atlas eater is one who consumes a representation of the physical world, the all encompassing Christ who has a jaw for news, the word already familiar from the last sentence. The second conjunct, a dog among the fairies, hints at a being who is destructive of magic, possibly Christ but only possibly. The first conjunct is the most difficult. Abandon is the angel of the bottomless pit, the guardian of hell. He (if angels are he) is in the hangnail cracked from Adam. The hangnail is one of the crucifixion images. If Abandon is in the hangnails of the crucifixion then he seems to be the one being crucified or at least to be intimately involved in the crucifixion. The hangnail is cracked from Adam, that can be read minimally as derived from Adam in some way. Since by Adam sin came into the world and thus hell for the sinful, and the dog among the fairies is from Adam's fork, i.e., descended from Adam, we might take it that since Christ was descended from Adam we have further support for reading dog among the fairies as being an image of Christ. But the life of Christ and the wages of sin are both in question on the cross in the doctrine of the atonement. This also allows for a reading equating Christ with Abandon although again it does not force it. On

this reading the subjects of the second sentence are also syntactically iconic of the trinity. This in turn provides an additional symmetry in that both the sentences either side of the full stop are now not only structurally symmetrical in their subjects but also iconically symmetrical.

With, comparatively speaking, so much symmetry, is there any more? It seems not but there is a little more structural iconicity. If we look at the predicates in sentences two and three combined, there are three.

If we look again at the idiosyncrasy of the compounding in the poem we have already seen that the compounds become more transparent in their meaning as the poem proceeds. The semantic transparency of the noun phrases in general increases as the poem proceeds, even if the reference of the noun phrases does not become any easier to determine. This can be seen as second area of structural iconicity. As the subject matter of the poem proceeds from turmoil of the crucifixion to the post crucifixion period, the semantics of the poem becomes more lucid, less opaque just as the metre at the end of the poem finally becomes regular. The poem's beginning is set at night. Night is again the setting of the last section of the poem but it is a more lucid night when the Christ scrapes at the narrator's cradle under the Christward shelter because the Christ who does that is the cosmic all encompassing Christ.*

REFERENCE

Thomas, D. (1952) *Collected poems, 1934-1952*, London: J. M. Dent & Sons.

* This study was completed while its author was a Visiting Professor at Bethany College, Bethany, WV. His thanks are due to the USIS for a grant which made this fellowship possible and to the help and support of administration and faculty at Bethany College for providing space and time in which to work. "Altarwise by owligh" by Dylan Thomas was taken from *Collected Poems, 1934-52*, published by J. M. Dent, and is reprinted with permission of David Higham associates. Thanks are also due to Dénes Nagy for help with conceptualising the concepts of slide points and vectors.