

Summertime of the Dead Whispered the Truth of His Joy: A Response to Eynel Wardi*

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As a starting point to my discussion of Thomas's "Poem in October" and Wardi's thoughtful presentation of it, I find it necessary to distinguish three "personae" taking part in the poem on different levels, and performing different functions. This "personage distinct-ion" is actually but the first step in my attempt to draw a line separating the different times and places to be found in the poem and in Wardi's discussion of it. The poem, as a *written* work of art, presents three figures to the reader: first there is the boy, whose time and locations are the past of youth and "the woods the river and sea" of the country. To these same locations where the boy once "walked with his mother," the grown man "set forth" on his thirtieth birthday, the day that the poem tells us about. The poet, as he *writes* his poem, as he is revealed by the act of his writing (i.e. the written poem), is looking back on two events and two personae (*the boy* and *the grown man*, as I call them henceforth). This distinction is deliberately blurred in Wardi's discussion, as part of the metaphoric way in which her language, guided by psychoanalytically oriented phenomenological approach, treats the concepts of time and space in order to look at the poem as an expression of unified experience. Through her use of language, Wardi projects (to use her own term) the metaphoric reunion between the boy and the grown man (in the sixth stanza) onto the poet. The use Wardi makes of the notion of *voice*, which she

*Reference: Eynel Wardi, "A Boy in the Listening: On Voice, Space, and Rebirth in the Poetry of Dylan Thomas," *Connotations* 9.2 (1999/2000): 190-209.

acknowledges to be a mystique of the poetic voice, turns out to be a concept flexible enough to allow a crossing of lines dividing different times, metaphor and reality, and the content of the poem and its form and medium. It is "the voice that integrates the split self in the dimension of time" (193). Thus the voice of the boy, although "long dead" and existing only in memory, is united with the voice of the grown man, whom the poem describes as listening and looking but never as singing or saying anything (the verb *sang* is actually used only as a metaphor in the poem, applied to the "mystery" and to nature). In the course of Wardi's discussion the voice of these two (the grown man who is united with the boy) is identified with the voice of the poet, who actually has no voice except as a metaphor, since he *writes* and does not sing. But it is "the poetic voice," according to Wardi, that "constitutes imaginary spaces that accommodate its subject, locating him in, and in relation to the world" (190) so the borders separating different spaces, and separating the metaphoric and the literal use of the term space, are done away with too. Wardi's language locates the poet in the surroundings of the grown man and, moreover, applies the notion of space to such diverse terms as "poems [which] are, indeed, places to be in" (191); to the voice "in its 'oral-aural' dimension . . . the acoustic, or acoustic-like spaces of poetic resonance" (191); and to the imagination and other mental and emotional processes or functions, taking place as it seems in "a psychic space, which is to be associated with emotional centeredness as well as with the mental spaciousness we experience upon the reception of a voice that really speaks to us" (191). This double-edged language analysis cuts both ways: while it enables Wardi to draw a creative and meaningful pheno-menological interpretation of the poem, it also obscures the distinctions among the different levels of the poem, Wardi's discussion of it, and reality itself. It is as if they all exist on the same plane, which turns out to be language itself; thus, voice becomes a metaphor for language, and vice versa. The metaphoric need for explaining abstract relations and processes is seen here to neutralize the impact of the *written* poem, its thoughtful structure as the act of the clear-headed poet looking back

at the grown man and knowing his experience is lost (while the memory of it may be a meaningful one) *by the very fact of writing the poem*: can one really claim to be regaining youth (reunion with the boy) while actually using this youth to maintain one's present (or, better, to maintain oneself in the present)? We might add to this what the reader sometimes ignores while trying to "activate" the poem as an experience with notions of unity and wholeness: the revisions and craftsmanship productive of its final form, which is often attained through a strenuous struggle with the words on the page and their different meanings at different times to different persons (including the changing moods of the poet, and of course the reader). When Wardi writes: "Indeed, he can listen *while* speaking the poem, to the effect of finding his true voice as well as his space" (197; Wardi's italics), the unison of voices and times and places is what enables her afterwards to claim the rebirth of the poet: "By appropriating the child's song through its 'in-vocative' articulation, the poet integrates his inner child, whereby he regenerates himself as a poet" (200). The rebirth of the poet is possible only through this blurring that language helps to accomplish, so that a unity is achieved and processes can claim coherence.

The identification of the poet with the speaker of his poem, the one experiencing the events of the poem, can be ignored for various reasons in various cases. But "Poem in October" seems to be a complicated case in this regard: the act of writing declares itself as a phase of great force and consciousness by the emphasized structure and organization of the written poem. Wardi writes of the nostalgic and romantic reunion between the boy and the grown man ("That his tears burned my cheeks and his heart moved in / Mine"), as follows: "the poet comes to meet and eventually unite with the child he once was—the child who is the father of the Romantic poet, who bears 'the truth' of his heart and 'joy' and is thus the poet's true, authentic 'voice'" (199). This reunion, I believe, is rejected by the poet as master of a *written* art. It might be that the boy once sang, and it might be that the grown man sang as he traveled his childhood country again—

although, as stated, the poem does not describe him as singing (but as listening and looking, moved to tears by “the reunion” with the child in the sixth stanza). However, applying the metaphor of voice to the *written* poem is problematic; though helping to construe the poem as an expression of unified experience, it reduces the poem’s different registers, personae, times, and locations. The way Thomas handles his lines and rhythm might suggest that he is more of a modernist than it might seem at first. Thomas differentiates the act of writing from the act of experiencing. Thus, it should be made clear that it is the grown man, not the poet, who is reuniting (i.e., emotionally and mentally identifying) with the boy. Wardi’s analysis of the poem describes beautifully the possible relations between the grown man and “his inner child”; but as I see it, relations of this kind are to be distinguished from the poet, who presents himself in “Poem in October” as a master of the *written* word, and who understands the experiences of both his childhood and his thirtieth birthday as generating a *poem* (not the poet) while using his life as a resource even as it gives them meaning.

As noted, *voice* is the term bearing the transformation: the poem itself has no voice, as the speaker is a figure of speech the reader uses when actually reading (usually with the eyes, not aloud) the silent written words. Voice, in written poetry, is but a metaphor; however, it is needed as an “intermediary space” to connect different personae at different levels of the poem, and as such it is presented and functions in Wardi’s essay: “At the interface of the literal and the metaphorical, voice in poetry is both sound and style; it is both the material articulation of a poem—a projection of the body in time and into space—and the poet’s identifying style or distinctive ‘voice’” (192). Since our body is in space anyway, it is rather the poet’s thoughts that are projected into space as a written poem. Especially since we consider our thoughts to last in time, their projection onto the page enables the poet to treat them spatially, structuring and ordering the stanza and its lines to create double and ambiguous meanings. The reader, while trying to transform the spatial form of the poet’s words into a tempo-

ral narrative, confronts these ambivalent orderings as both intriguing and disturbing. It is an obstacle, but a challenging one, in combining word with word and line with line to form a coherent explanation or narrative.

It seems that such terms as "poetic voice" (190), while serving the description of the imaginative abilities of the poet, increase in the same breath the degree of fluidity between the time and space of the boy, of the grown man and of the poet. Part of Wardi's interest has to do with the continuity that constitutes according to some psychoanalytic theories the experience of the self as she finds it represented in Thomas's poem. Thus, looking at the poem as a "psychic space" and locating Thomas in it as the subject of this psychic space, serves a coherent interpretative purpose. But as this is achieved by the linguistic blurring of times and spaces, through this "poetic voice" which incorporates the three personae, this fluidity might in itself be interpreted as a solipsistic move. This may be so despite the fact that the essay aims to convince us of exactly the opposite view. As Wardi writes: "Thanks to the mnemonic spirit of the place and of his own song, the poet inherits the child's imaginative capacity for intimacy with the surrounding world, which is the gift of childhood's benign narcissism. What is benign about this state of narcissism is that it is not solipsistic, but relational: from the boy's subjective, but nonetheless other-oriented perspective, there is a true dialogue going on between himself and the trees and the stones and the fish . . ." (202). Since Wardi does not clearly draw the line separating the three personae, their times and spaces fuse and the poet cannot liberate himself from the imaginative constraint of the man who is the child "who is the father of the man" (199). "Acoustically speaking," says Wardi, "the bilateral journey dramatized in the poem is the journey of the *echo*, whose reverberation, as its transitive verb form suggests, moves both backwards and forwards, spanning a life, as it were, between the past and the future of the resonant voice" (199; Wardi's italics). But since voice itself is a metaphor, or, stated otherwise, the voice of the boy and the voice of the grown man and the voice of the

poet are not distinguishable, it is indeed an echo going back and forth within the confines of the self, which cannot be extended. The metaphoric use of terms thus curbs the poet's affective powers, for he is not credited with the ability to move beyond the father who unites with the child who is the father of the father-who-is-the-child: these are the reverberations actually taking place. It is "inside" language, so to speak, that they are taking place, since future and past are compressed in this discourse and language into a single time that is all times: the poet, who is the speaker, who unites with the child, is going on a journey that is "a bilateral one, moving towards the future and towards the past simultaneously" (198).

It seems to me that however delicate and profound the relations Wardi draws, the cost is too high. Contrary to the "echo interpretation" Wardi suggests, I would argue for the poet's acknowledgment of the arrow of time, which leaves both childhood (even if it was not exhausted when he was a child), and the imaginative reunion with it, lost and unreachable. Wardi writes that "the poetry of Dylan Thomas energetically, if not obsessively, enacts what may be said to motivate much of modern poetry since the Romantics, namely, the wish for self-generation in and through the poetic utterance itself" (192). It seems to me that an alternative perspective considering the motivation of modern poetry might be fruitful here. Contrary to Wardi's attitude I would center on (1) the poets' skepticism while enacting such a "poetic utterance," i.e. the possibility that many (especially modern) poets understand the impossibility of the mission Wardi attributes to them; and (2) the suppression of this understanding in their poetry. In all likelihood, this suppression has to do with the "existential anxiety" Wardi mentions (192), but the emphasis in our discussion is on the recognition of failure and on camouflaging this failure while at the same time acknowledging it. It is the very fact of the act of writing, of the written form, that bears out this understanding. The act of writing bears out the acknowledgment of the arrow of time and, accordingly, of the difference between things past and their textual recreation.

Thus, the tension between the wish for rebirth—namely for life—and the understanding of its illusory quality is to be found in the ambivalent and ambiguous ways the poet structures his poem. This self-aware inability for reunion and rebirth is at the same time the freedom that the poet does possess. The poet experiences childhood as a resource because it is gone, and his 'rebirth' as a poet is not a function of recapturing the truth and joy of his youth; rather, it is a function of understanding the truth of his present life, as the life of remembering things past and turning them into poetry. Thus, "the poet's journey" is not "towards restoring his childhood perception" (204) nor "in quest of his lost voice" (193), but it is his writing about such a journey that hints at and finally exposes his recognition that childhood perception is dead, but the memory of its being is still with him. The poet's "heart's truth," contrary to the child's and the grown man's apparent truth, is the acknowledgment of time.

This can be seen when noticing the thoughtful enjambments and the careful ordering of the poem. Agreeing with Wardi's emphasis on the enjambment leaving "In the listening" as a line by itself, I would add a comment on this line's relations with the next. When the poet looks back at time he sees the passing of time (which means death and destruction) already incorporated within the past. The *cutting* of "in the listening" leaves it to the next line to reveal that the summertime is of death, and that this is the truth of his joy, as the poet well knows ("Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy"). Looking back, the poet hints through his lineation that the boy is already in the listening to the passing of time, to the death that is the "truth of his joy." Even if we are to understand the word "dead" as the inanimate objects of nature surrounding the boy, the opposition between life (the boy's life) and "the dead" hints at the same tension: whereas his life lasts in time, the lifelessness (and immortality) of matter isolates him from what he is apparently trying to come into contact with. These latent but traceable insights are revealed in the continuation of the stanza: "And the mystery / Sang alive / Still in the water and singingbirds." Apparently, as Wardi writes, "What the mystery sings alive

through its sacramental connotations is the communion between nature and the child of which the adult now comes to partake. Thanks to the mnemonic spirit of the place and of his own song, the poet inherits the child's imaginative capacity for intimacy with the surrounding world . . ." (202). However, the poet does not *sing* but *writes*. And further, it is not the place but the poet who has the mnemonic spirit; the poet has the ability to remember (and write about) himself on the morning of his thirtieth birthday, traveling through the familiar places of his youth, and while there remembering, or reconstructing, those times. So the mystery is alive only for the boy or the grown man who apparently unites with him. For the grown man, it may "still"—implying duration: even to that moment—be sung as he unites with the boy; but for the poet it is "still"—implying: without movement or sound—since it is long gone. The enjambment thus draws the line dividing times: "sang alive" is (past) time of the grown man, who metaphorically unites with the child; and "still in the water and singingbirds" is the (present) time of writing looking at the past—whose mystery is now dead, muted and buried in his memory. This ambivalent mode, revealing Thomas's modern dimension, continues into the last stanza. This stanza repeats lines from the fourth, sixth, and first stanzas. The poet takes lines that served him as he wove the poem's apparent narrative, and through their new structuring and repetition, through their juxtaposition in a new order in the space of the page, he exposes their previous meaning as illusionary and mistaken.

And there could I marvel my birthday
 Away but the weather turned around. And the true
 Joy of the long dead child sang burning
 In the sun.
 It was my thirtieth
 Year to heaven stood there then in the summer noon
 Though the town below lay leaved with October blood.
 O may my heart's truth
 Still be sung
 On this high hill in a year's turning.

Instead of "There could I marvel" (in the fourth stanza) it is now "And there could I marvel my birthday"—the repetition is emphasized by the added "And," indicating the difference of time now applied to the word "birthday." It is now clear that there are two different past times, that is to say, the poet hints that the day of birthday was a day of marvel, when he marveled at the conflation of times, but that was there and then, not now (at the moment of writing). The next line clarifies that the weather of marveling has turned and gone for good as is seen now, carrying with it the truth of the boy. The line "And the true," which breaks to the next one, "Joy of the long dead child sang burning," reveals that "the *truth* of his joy" [my italics] from the sixth stanza is transformed into the true present. The space or interval before "And the true" typographically suggest that these words alone relate to the next stanza, as though there were an implicit colon after them. What we get is a statement from the poet about what is true, namely that the "Joy of the long dead child sang burning"—the child is long dead, and his joy, even when it sang, was burning. The temporality of time, as seen from the poet's present, was consuming the boy already at the time of his childhood joy. This meaning of the phrase does not actually change if one reads it without the supposed colon between the lines. The next line once more lends itself to two different readings, but they both point in the same direction. "In the sun," taken as completing the phase begun in the preceding lines, refers primarily to the sun of the noon of traveling and of childhood, meaning that it is already there that time has started its corrosive work on us. But "the sun" is now (at the time of writing) also metaphorically the symbol of knowledge and consciousness, of the insight the boy and the grown man could not grasp. The cutting of the two next lines, "It was my thirtieth / Year to heaven stood there then in the summer noon" distances heaven from the poet on his thirtieth birthday. The heaven that seemed so close, surrounding him at the beginning of the poem and his journey ("It was my thirtieth year to heaven"), the heaven he supposedly achieved by union with the boy, is now far removed. That "[Y]ear to heaven," meaning his

illusionary birthday journey, stands starkly against the next line, which is the poet's reality, the town with October blood, from which he is trying to escape at the beginning of the poem and to which he finally returns knowing the truth of time's bloody passage. The image of "the knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall" is retrospectively seen as a hint at the web the voices weave, capturing his imagination and reminding him of a lost world, and thus in the next line he "set foot" and was himself captured in it. But the past is gone and the future is always unknown. The poet cannot reach beyond his time save through a tentative wish, as the final lines of the poem show. His wish for another birthday journey "in a year's turning" now incorporates the knowledge that it is an illusory union with the boy's voice, as can be seen in the line "Still be sung." Apparently lasting in time, the voice is "still"—without sound or movement—muted by time itself, existing only as a memory and a metaphor the poet hopes to possess "in a year's turning."

Looking back on "Poem in October," we may conclude that the title of the poem, seemingly misleading while we journey with the grown man "along the poem," is actually accurate; it refers to the poet in the mode of writing, as is disclosed at the end of the poem and retrospectively. The title regains its original meaning, which the poem seemingly turns around: the poet's writing table is "leaved with October blood," since he registers the passing of time by virtue of his gift for writing about times lost.

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