

A Boy in the Listening: On Voice, Space, and Rebirth in the Poetry of Dylan Thomas

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This essay addresses the relation between voice and space in the poetry of Dylan Thomas in terms of the desire for self-generation enacted in it.¹ Focusing mainly on Thomas's birthday poem, "Poem in October," the essay explores the thematic and the performative aspects of the poetic voice and the ways in which it constitutes imaginary spaces that accommodate its subject, locating him in, and in relation to the world. By distinction from those poems in which Thomas characteristically celebrates the sonorous intensity of the self-assertive and world-creating poetic articulation, "Poem in October" is primarily about voice in its auditory dimension, where listening proves to possess no lesser, if not greater, creative and regenerative properties. The analysis of the poem is preceded by a general introductory discussion of the phenomenon of voice in poetry and in Thomas's poetry in particular, and a short reading of Thomas's "Poem on his Birthday" as a paradigmatic example, which characteristically evokes the transformative practice of high-powered poetic articulation. The discussion of poetic listening in the quieter "Poem in October" concentrates, together with its attentive speaker, on the sensation of inhabitable spaces yielded by the listening, while pointing out Thomas's distinctive appeal to the most primary perceptual experiences creating the sense of spatial embodiment and relatedness that regenerate the speaking/listening subject of his poetry. A conceptualization of this effect follows in the last section of the essay, which introduces a psychoanalytic approach that regards voice and the acoustic spaces which it generates in early infancy as a crucial factor in the constitution of the individual as an embodied speaking subject.

The mystique of voice is as old and as various as the ancient myths of creation. With respect to poetry its aspects include some of the following

elements, which even the modern imagination cannot repudiate. There is the empowering magic of the voice that projects worlds into being; voice opens an image—be it of wondrously fresh or reassuringly—or uncannily—familiar worlds. There are the imaginary scenes of new worlds, encapsulated in the comic-strip bubbles blown up by creative words that sustain their co-temporal creators' existence—at least for as long as they last. And then there are the mnemonic images opened up by the nostalgic voice, which invoke things past into palpable presence, thus restoring continuity to a life or a self fragmented by time and forgetfulness. But, perhaps even more effective in procuring the keen speaker's sense of "being" are the mental spaces that are projected by voice in its "oral-aural" dimension, as Walter Ong termed it in his modern version of the mystique of *The Presence of the Word*.² These are the acoustic, or acoustic-like spaces of poetic resonance that accommodate, or contain the speaking subject *in* his, or her, or somebody else's poem. Poems are, indeed, places to be in; they are habitable environments that *place* one *in* relation to the implied otherness which voice calls, or re-calls, into presence. Or, alternatively, they are (or may be) intermediary spaces that relate one to the world,³ and this not only by dint of representing segments of it, but also by virtue of their indeterminate resonance, which opens one to the irreducible connotative infinity to which they point beyond themselves.⁴ Beyond their representational signification, poems are indices to the world, which discloses itself to the attuned textual subject who opens himself to it. Indeed, it is precisely the non-specificity of the "world" which the indeterminate language of poetry indicates—or resonates—that ensures our openness to its presence. That presence, or resonance, as David Michael Levin suggests in his Heideggerian reflections on *The Listening Self*,⁵ discloses itself to us as a *ground* for our being, and, as he adds (with Merleau-Ponty in mind), an *auditory* ground at that, which sustains our embodiment as listening beings. But the ground or space for being that is opened by effective poetry is, ultimately, beyond the perceptual or the imaginary, although it is created by these mental functions; it is, rather, 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.

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." These fuse to figure in Thomas's extravagant self-mystifying dramatizations of the poetic act as the actual (pneumatic) projection of the poet-maker's own being into presence. Indeed, anyone who has heard Thomas's vibrant and theatrical "bardic" voice in BBC or other recordings may easily intuit his mystique of the poet's self-authenticating creative voice, whose incantatory magic would raise the dead and regenerate the depressed. That the ultimate object of this magical speech act is primarily its emergent agent is often testified to, in Thomas's poetry, by the very vibrancy of the utterance, whose obviously relished sensuousness suggests an adherence to the wishful prospect of being embodied in the oral and acoustic materiality of the words and in their relational gestures towards the world. But the resonant plenitude of that narcissistically invested materiality also invokes its anxiety-inducing antidote, namely, the void that fuels voice, and notably the modern voice: the melancholic hollow of non-being that haunts the de-centred subject of the utterance while at the same time serving as a sounding box for his wishfully eloquent yearning for being.

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; the wish, that is, of a de-centred, or emotionally dissociated subject to speak him/herself into being—"one," and "there"—in a meaningful, embodied relation to the otherness of language and the world. The intensity of that wish in Thomas's work and its underlying existential anxiety manifest themselves in his self-reflexive preoccupation with the themes of genesis and creation and with birth and regeneration in the shadow of death and loss, as well as in his fascination with voice and the auditory at large. As a *topos* as well as an expressive medium, "voice" and its resonance in Thomas's work emerge as generative phenomena that yield an experience of being, momentarily creating in their subject (the speaker and/or the listener) a sense of temporal and spatial continuity that

constitutes the subjective ontology of the self. It is the voice that integrates the split self in the dimension of time—as in Thomas's birthday poems, "Poem in October" and "Poem on his Birthday," where the sense of the passing of time and its corrosiveness propels the poet-protagonist to give actuality to his birth-day by setting out on a symbolic journey in quest of his lost voice. Finding the muted voice in these poems generates in the speaker a sense of being one within himself by putting him in touch with his creative sources and resources—with "the long dead child" in him, in the "October" poem, and with his time-worn faith and desire in "Poem on his Birthday." In "Vision and Prayer," another poem about regeneration through renewed faith, the speaker's prayer to be reborn through union with his dissociated self, configured by a vision of Christ being born "in the next room," is actually realized in the course of his symbolic devotional gesture. This transformation is locally illustrated by the sequence, "In the name of the unborn / and the undesirers [. . .] One to / Be I pray," where the desiring "I" emerges as a result of the preceding articulation of the prayer. The efficacy of the poetic act as a whole manifests itself in the final line of the poem, where the poet is re-generated through a communion with the newly born Son which lends him an integrity of being and concomitantly, the magic force of his poetic word: "And the sun roars at the prayer's end."⁶

The "orphyic" gesture of making the sun rise by dint of the poetic practice is a recurrent motif in Thomas's writing: "I pluck again / The sweet, steel strings," he wrote, "To bring the sun to life."⁷ Manifesting his mystification of the poetic voice, this somewhat grandiose magic gesture also foregrounds the correlative intensity of the existential anxiety underlying Thomas's wishful self-generative poetry, as well as the spatial imagination that gives it shape. For indeed, although the ontological insecurity that seems largely to animate Thomas's fascination with voice is most notably expressed in his repeated concern with time in its destructive aspect and its fragmented experience, it is ultimately in the spatial imagery that he employs for troping this concern that the most effective expression of his yearning for being and its underlying predicament can be found. His markedly spatial tropology effectively expresses a great longing for

groundedness and self-embodiment, a longing that, moreover, is actually the cause, rather than the symptom, of the manifest temporal concern with which Thomas is so often preoccupied. A case in point is "Poem on his Birthday," a self-reflexive poem whose speaker, an "orphic" poet, sets out to overcome his melancholic anxiety in the face of time's destructiveness through a poetic gesture that regenerates his faith and self-confidence to the point of an ecstatic exaltation of the power of the poetic word. The "orphic" poetic gesture is metaphorically depicted in terms of two successive sea-journeys, a cathartic journey to an imaginary death in the dark and silent bottom of the sea, followed by an enlightened surface cruise in the newly risen roaring sun. In this poem, with its triumphant ending, the existential predicament underlying the "orphic" transformation is clearly evident—indeed, so evident that it almost undermines the magic of its poetic resolution.

"Poem on his Birthday" starts off "*In the mustardseed sun,*" a figure reflecting the speaker's ontological insecurity in its condensation of the feeble light of the melancholic dawn of his birthday, on the one hand, and the initially wind-swept, bird-pecked and drowned mustard seed from the sower's parable in the New Testament, on the other.⁸ The literal condition of the biblical seed, which represents faith, illustrates a situation of non-receptivity to Jesus's Word within a narrative that depicts the vicissitudes of a seed that *fails to find good ground in which to sprout*. Like the biblical mustard seed, the "mustardseed sun" in Thomas's poem is initially menaced by hostile environment. It is like a "wind turned" "thistledown," helpless "among beaks / And palavers of birds" that threaten to devour it, and it is placed "[b]y full tilt river and switchback sea" that eventually sweep it, or its equivalent, "the sandgrain day," into "the bent bay's grave," to set there before it has ever had a chance to rise. Significantly, the mustardseed sun configures not only the seed-like poet on his birthday, but also the space that contains him, his ground for being "*in the mustardseed sun.*" The threat to the speaker's spatial bearings is also expressed in the eventual tilting and wrecking of his more obvious and, once again, both metaphorical and metonymical, habitat: as early as the end of the first stanza, his birdlike abode, "his house on stilts high

among beaks," turns into "driftwood," destining its tenant to join the drowned, "steeple stemmed" herons who "walk in their shroud" in the underwater. The herons' stemmed steeples also represent the poet-protagonist's yet again metaphorical and metonymical abode, a church steeple where "the rhymers in the long tongued room [. . .] tolls his birthday bell." The latter is also the bell of the Angelus and the mouth (or beak) of the poet, who "sings towards anguish" with a dispirited, "tumbledown tongue." Thus, the poem's connotative polyvalence draws the connection between the rising of the sun (and Son) on the poet's birthday and his capacity to make it rise so as to have a place to be and grow "in" the sun.

In the first part of the poem, the poet's orphic power seems to be doubted to the desperate point of his being tongue-tied by his birthday blues, which as it were drown him in a "cavernous [underwater] silence." The situation changes, however, in the course of the act of faith that is the poem: the poet-protagonist tolls and tolls his muted bell till he finds tongue to sing himself alive and the sun up to its triumphant zenith. His is an act of faith with no a-priori faith; a prayer that draws on the materiality of its motions: he "prays [. . .] *faithlessly* unto Him / Who is the [symbolic] light of old" made new, or newly relevant, however, by dint of the persistent incantation of the wishful voice. "Though I cry with tumbledown tongue," he "[counts his] blessings aloud" until they materialize and, moreover, "[t]o his nimbus bell cool kingdom come," its luminous plenitude invoked into such vibrant, luminous and musical presence that it overflows its bounds to fill the whole world with its audio-visual grace. The poem culminates with the sun high in sky and the poet's triumphant declaration that "the closer I move / To death [. . .] / The louder the sun blooms [like the Son who is both Word and Light] / And the tusked, ramshackling sea exalts" together with the "dew lark [that] sings" and the rest of the world that, "With more triumphant faith / Then ever was since the world was said, / Spins its morning of praise." At this happy point, the sea that initially threatened to drown the poet's "seed" of faith and creativity carries his ship on its tame elephantine back, while the wind blows its sail under the blossoming sun, now grown into a robust mustard-tree whose branches, as in the Sower's parable, are filled with the song of the now harmless birds that

reverberate the poet's sacramental song—or birthday toll: for indeed, the poet's devotional, "orphyic" gesture turns the whole world into a huge bell, or sound box; a colossal Angelus whose acoustic space contains the speaker and gives him a ground in which to germinate and grow—not despite, but *in time*. In tolling his birthday bell the poet has created for himself a *space in time*—a space for being generated, precisely, by "telling" the time (as bells do) and thus tuning into it; a space for being *in* the loud sun, or its synaesthetic aura, created by the resonance of the poet's voice.

But there is, I feel, something hollow in the poem's culminating crescendo; something too loud, manic almost, in the vibrancy of the sun's loud bloom—or sonic boom—in its (i.e., the poet's) competition with death ("the closer I move to death [. . .] the louder the sun blooms") that betrays a sense of uneasiness, not to say despair. It sounds as though the poet were screaming at the top of his voice to silence death, or some terrible absence. Thomas confirms something of this sense in one of his last letters, where he describes his sea-faring "orphyic" persona as "a manacles orator with a wet trombone" 'braying' his "brassy naught."⁹ Thomas seems here to be trumpeting away the silence of a world that is not really there for him—but as an echo-box; a "said" sacramental world whose constitutive Word is ultimately the poet's, not God's, and which consequently lacks the autonomous reality and stability that might serve ontologically to ground him. To my profane ears, the condition of the seed in Thomas's Sower's parable remains somewhat precarious: I hear in the voice of the poet "on his Birthday" a tone of anxiety, that the minute he should stop singing, the sun might shrink back into the size of a mustard seed, and the seed fall into the beak of one of the malevolent birds that peck at the poet in his "slant, racking house" at the beginning of the poem, or be swept, weightless and helpless, down the drain of the waters of the bay. Indeed, the brassy orator with the wet trombone has here more in common, it seems to me, with Scheherazade than with Orpheus.

The speaker of "Poem in October," by contrast, is quite simply himself, with no mythological affinities. This birthday poem, which was written five years before "Poem on his Birthday," is on the whole free of anxiety and of the need to dispel it by grandiose gestures. The speaker of this

quieter but far happier poem enjoys enough security in his being in the world to be able not only to speak peacefully, but also to listen. Indeed, he can listen *while* speaking the poem, to the effect of finding his true voice as well as his space—rather than forcing them into being. Instead of seeking faith by means of a willed act of faith that suppresses its fundamental absence, this poem begins with the poet's faith in the world's being there for him, and in articulated good faith at that. The poet wakes up at the dawn of his birthday to the sound of voices urging him to celebrate it. His awakening is like a good, smooth birth into a welcoming world, populated, for a change, by friendly versions of the water and birds, which act as midwives in the easy labour:

It was my thirtieth year to heaven
 Woke to my hearing from harbour and neighbour wood
 And the mussel pooled and the heron
 Priested shore
 The morning beckon
 With water praying and call of seagull and rook
 And the knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall
 Myself to set foot
 That second
 In the still sleeping town and set forth.

By sharp contrast to "Poem on his Birthday," the auditory imagery here is of the world inviting the speaker to be born: the morning 'beckons,' the water is 'praying' and the birds are 'calling' him to emerge. Rather than having to assert his birth through a cry against a hostile world, the newborn 'wakes to his *hearing*' the world beckon to "[him]self to set foot" and "set forth." Even the friction and pressure of the actual birth is relieved here by the benevolent world, which takes the effort upon itself: again, the speaker *hears* his own foetal response to the world's invitation, in "the knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall." That knock is in turn followed by his passive emergence as the object ("myself") of both the beckoning and the sentence, the main clause of which, significantly enough, lacks a subject ("woke to my hearing" has no subject). Only in the next stanza, after the invitation is repeated in

My birthday began with the water-
Birds and the birds of the winged trees flying my name

does the newborn emerge as an active subject:

And I rose
In rainy autumn
And walked abroad in a shower of all my days.

And in order to make that separation easier, the water and the birds
graciously make way:

High tide and the heron dived when I took the road
Over the border
And the gates
Of the town closed as the town awoke.

This symbolic birth is the point of departure for the speaker's birthday walk in the country. Like the journey in "Poem on his Birthday," the walk lasts between a somewhat dreary dawn and a bright noon, passing through equally symbolic geographical sites that illustrate the traveller's changing perspective on his longer, life's journey: the day-tour takes place between "rainy autumn" in "the still sleeping town" and a sunny "summer noon" on a "high hill" overlooking "the town below," which lies "leaved with October blood" marking the poet's birthday (October 7th) as well as his mortality and its eventual realization in death—but at a distance. The journey is thus a bilateral one, moving towards the future and towards the past simultaneously. The future lies in the fallen bloody leaves and perhaps also in the torn leaves of the calendar, but also in its more optimistic prospect, suggested by the poem's opening reference to the greater journey's destination in "It was my thirtieth year *to heaven* [. . .]." The past lies in the reverberation of the poet's childhood in the landscapes and weather-scapes of his birthday walk, and then again, so does his future: for it is the return of the voice of the child he once was that makes for the poet's regeneration on his birthday by connecting him to his creative resources, which he presently taps to re-verberate the child's song in his

poem, hoping that it may "Still be sung / On this high hill in a year's turning" (stanza 7). Acoustically speaking, then, 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 forward, spanning a life, as it were, between the past and the future of the resonant voice.

Following nature's luring sounds, which turn out to be echoes of his voice, the poet comes to meet and eventually unite with the child he once was—the child who is father of the Romantic poet,¹⁰ who bears "the truth" of his heart and "joy" and is thus the poet's true, authentic "voice." The connection between the adult poet and the child is established by a synaesthetic dialectic of voice and space: the adult poet invokes his childhood landscapes (where "he walked with his mother"), the mnemonic geography of which in turn invokes the child's "voice," or creative perception of them. The places visited during the walk, as Matthias Bauer states in his essay on Thomas's return journeys, 'go on knowing' the dead child and 'preserve his voice'; "the poet ascends the hill [. . .] where he suddenly finds himself revisiting (or being revisited by) the country of his childhood and where the voice of the boy has been kept for him by the 'water and singingbirds' belonging to this place: 'These were the woods the river and sea / Where a boy / In the listening / Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy / To the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide. / And the mystery / Sang alive / Still in the water and singingbirds.'"¹¹ But the origin of the whisper reverberated by the mystery is not recognized until rather late in the journey, in the greater course of which the poet follows the child's voice unawares. Indeed, the journey dramatizes a gradual process of recognition and identification with "the long dead child," moving from acoustic to visual perception of him and finally to the introjection of his creative sensibilities. After hearing, in stanza 4, the child's "tall tales" of "blooming" "spring and summer," without knowing who tells them, the poet comes to see their source in the following stanza: "And I saw [. . .] so clearly a child's / Forgotten mornings when he walked with his mother / Through the parables / Of sun light / And the legends of the green chapels." Next, the child's imaginative gaze and

sensitivity become his own, as he literally incorporates their correlative organs in stanza 6, where, on seeing "the twice told fields of [his] infancy," "his [the child's] tears burned my cheeks and his heart moved in mine." This union with the "the long dead child" revived, whose "true / Joy" is heard singing in the sun in the final stanza, is the optimistic basis for the poet's culminating prayer that "*my heart's truth* [may] / Still be sung / [. . .] in a year's turning." By appropriating the child's song through its 'in-vocative' articulation, the poet integrates his inner child, whereby he regenerates himself as a poet. This oral-aural process of in-vocation, or 'voicing in,' creates the resonance of the ventriloquist poet's "song," and explains how the singing child comes to be father of the man.

But the return of the "long dead" child should not mislead us. The futurity of the nostalgic voice that makes possible the actualization (rather than mere commemoration) of the poet's birthday is guaranteed by the fact that childhood is a never-never land; its intense reality is that of a retroactive fantasy of ideal origins that sustains, according to the poet, the meaning of our present being with a face to the future. In other words, the nostalgic poet's bilateral mnemonic voice creates a future for him precisely because the object of his nostalgia never existed—as he represents it. The first to acknowledge this is, naturally, the father of the man. In his "Intimations of Immortality" ode, Wordsworth attributes the child's long lost creative perception to the inherently nostalgic childish imagination. The "simple creed of childhood" is based on intimations of a prior time immemorial, and "those first affections" accompanying it are associated with "shadowy recollections" within a nostalgic chain whose origin is not in the pre-natal immortality, but rather in the child's creative imagination, which is "*the fountain light* of all our day [. . .] the master light of all our seeing."¹² A similar kind of nostalgic chain unfolds itself in Thomas's "Poem in October," in the poet's audio-visual perception of "*the twice told fields of infancy*." The first to 'tell' these "fields" is the child himself, whose creative perception the poet re-assumes on re-calling "all the gardens / Of spring and summer," which reveal themselves to him "blooming in the *tall tales*" that are the child's old fibs literalized and visualized as trees. The child is the father of the poet, then, because he is the first to invent their shared nostalgic origins.

The literalization of the child's fictions is significant, because it is what makes it possible for the poet to enter and re-inhabit their spaces, following the child before him and yielding to his appeal. The child's stories grow like gardens and fields that beckon to the journeying poet, enticing him to come from "beyond the border" of his home town, where "pale rain" falls "over the dwindling harbour." Yet when the poet considers settling in these pleasant spaces—to "marvel [his] birthday away" there—"the weather [turns] round" like a metonymical weather-cock, re-directing the traffic in this geographic-atmospheric expedition, pushing the poet forward from one fictional space to another "down *the other air* and the blue altered sky": "And I saw in the turning so clearly a child's / Forgotten mornings when he walked with his mother / Through the *parables* / *Of sun light* / And the *legends of the green chapels*."

The other "air" is a pun that foregrounds the oral-aural relation between "voice"—song, tale, legends, and, in this case, "tune"—and space, atmospheric in this case, to accommodate the symbolic changes of the weather reflected in the replacement of the cloudy autumn sky by "the blue altered sky" and the sunshine. The "parables of sun light" "*through*" which the imaginative child once "walked" suggests the full bilateral trajectory of the child's and the poet's shared song. They may well be imagined as a series of luminous spaces of transition (a kind of arcade?) between two suns, the one projected back into the hollow of a past immemorial to constitute the invisible "fountain light" from which the orphic voice draws its nostalgic resonance, the other projected into the future, fuelled by that same resonance of "the true / Joy of the long dead child," who sings "burning / In the sun" in the poet's "thirtieth year to heaven." The luminous passage-way between the two suns representing the bilateral scope of the nostalgic reverberation does more than create a continuity between the past and the future; it spans an infinite space for representation between its infinitely receding end terms, the projected solar origins of a creative imagination that sets its own horizons. The re-birth embodied in this image is, then, that of a subjectivity experienced as creative potency and, correlatively, as a sense of actual and potential psychic expansion.

A nostalgic chain structures the poem itself, which moves from the dramatized moment of composition back to childhood and, as is suggested by the evocation of more primary perceptual experiences and their context of birth imagery, further back to early infancy. These times are superimposed on one another in the poem's mnemonic figurative matrix. Thus, the child's perception obviously colours the poem (the product of the adult's recuperation of his voice) with its projections onto nature. This occurs from the very beginning, where nature echoes the child's "song" in the "morning beckon[ing]" to the birthday poet "[w]ith water praying and call of seagull and rook" to repeat his birth by "set[ting] forth" on his birthday journey. But the fact of the projection is only acknowledged towards the end of the poem, in stanza 6, where the acoustics of the natural scene is explicitly attributed to the child:

These were the woods the river and sea
 Where a boy
 In the listening
 Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy
 To the trees and the stones and the fish in the tide.
 And the mystery
 Sang alive
 Still in the water and singingbirds.

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, 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, which do not only take in and remember what he whispers to them, but perhaps even initiate an enunciation of their own. This is suggested by the syntactic ambiguity created by the enjambments in "a boy / In the listening / Summertime of the dead whispered the truth of his joy." The break between the listening and its subject, the summertime

that listens to the child's whispering, creates the possibility that it is the summertime that whispers, while the boy is "In the listening," thus maintaining, within the "mystery" of semantic indeterminacy, a potential dialogue between nature and the child.

But even more important, I think, than this indeterminacy and the imaginary dialogue which it suggests are the implications of the isolated phrase, 'a boy in the listening.' Regardless of whether or not the world is actually saying something, the boy is listening out, imaginatively attuned to the world, open. This openness enables him to *be* in the listening, embodied in the acoustic space of it, rather than shout against his anxiety of annihilation. The boy can be *in* the listening of a narcissism that is disposed towards the world, rather than a narcissism that shuts or shouts it away. Moreover, his disposition of openness enables him to sustain the mystery of the communion with nature without reducing it to subject-object categories. Such "negative capability" is implicit in the enigmatic syntax of the line evoking the experience: just what "the mystery sang alive" remains, to some extent, a mystery, because the verb "sang" has no object, which suggests that the mystery sang *itself* alive, as a third, autonomous entity accompanying or generated by the encounter between nature and the child/poet.¹³ Finally, the temporality of the singing is also indeterminate, due to the reference to its present performers, "the water and singingbirds." It is said that the water and the birds "still" sing here, in the country of the poet's childhood revisited, yet the "still" might also refer back to the duration of the poem itself, which begins with the water and the birds singing the poet awake at the dawn of his birthday, and echoing further back, perhaps, to the event of the actual birth which it commemorates.

The motif of the water and the singing birds and its modulations are woven into the associative texture of the poem so that they enhance its meaning both symbolically and at the concrete level of perception and sensation, thus illustrating the *topos* of voice as a transitional phenomenon between language and the body. While the first stanza resounds with noises of the water and the birds in the harbour assisting in the speaker's symbolic re-birth and its acoustic perception,¹⁴ in the second stanza the newborn

is being baptized: "My birthday began with the *water*— / Birds and the birds of the winged trees flying my *name*." This Christening ceremony takes place thanks to the enjambment that separates between the water of the "water / Birds" on one side, and the birds and their name-giving colleagues on the other. These elements, in turn, also represent the conjunction of biology and semiosis respectively, in the advent of the newborn as a speaking subject, as well as in the poetic voice, with the material "flow" of its music and its adherence to the linguistic code. Indeed, the aerial (rather than watery) space where the voice flows is cleared by the separation between the water and the air, suggested by the distinction between the water birds and the birds of the winged trees, and by the transformation of the sea water in the poem into atmospheric humidity—clouds and rain—which the poet literally surmounts when climbing the sunny hill overlooking the rainy sea town below. That aerial space is cleared as the poet makes his mnemonic *verbal* way up the hill of his childhood through synaesthetic elaborations of the bird / water motif: he walks along "roadside bushes *brimming* with whistling"; he listens "To the rain wringing / wind," which the enjambment makes sound at first like the rain *ringing*; and he sees and hears the wrung "lark full cloud" which rains chirps and twitterings, till it disperses to clear the way for "the other air and the blue altered sky" of childhood.

The "other air" combines, as suggested earlier, the oral-aural aspects of the *atmosphere* of childhood and its *melody*, which is 'sung alive still' to reverberate the dead child's voice not only in the revisited geographic site of the water and the singing birds, but also in the verbal flow and imaginative flight of Thomas's poem. The aspect of childhood's "atmosphere" is clearly related to the poet's preoccupation with the more concrete, aerial sensations of atmospheric states and climates. "Poem In October" is a poem about the weather; the air in it conducts both sound—ultimately the child's voice—and the symbolic meteorological changes representing temporal changes as well as correlative transformations of mood in the course of the poet's journey towards restoring his childhood perception. Thus, his journey, conducted by the weather-cock (another bird!), takes route in the fickle October weather, whose changing

moments are magnified into seasons through which the poet moves till he finally reaches childhood's sunny "summertime." But the main significance of the weathers and seasons in the poem lies, I feel, less in the symbolic temporal dimension than in the concrete, spatial dimension of sensation. The latter consists in the atmosphere surrounding the traveler upon his return to the "fond climates" and the "other air" of his childhood, as well as in his actual experience of embodiment in space, suggested by references to the most basic aerial sensations. The effective evocation, in the poem, of such primary "haptic"—tactile and auditory—experiences of being *in* the musical and meteorological "air," gives body to the symbolic images of birth and post-natal states that extend the reach of and amplify the poem's nostalgic resonance.

The psychoanalytic literature that reflects on the formative role of the early "aerial" experiences in the emergence of the subject as an embodied speaking being throws light on the significance of the concrete images of re-birth in Thomas's poem in terms of the conjunction of body and language which they configure. In their attempt to imagine the development of the infant's basic sense of itself as a more or less unified being, authors like Françoise Dolto, Didiér Anzieu and Dominique Ducard imagine the evolution of a primary "body image" through the imaginative elaboration of respiratory, olfactory and notably auditory experiences of the "aerial" environment. In this context, and often guided by the belief that "the sonic space is the first psychic space,"¹⁵ these authors postulate primordial acoustic or "*sonic spaces*," which yield a body image that precedes the scopic, specular image of the "unified body" or the rudimentary self formed, according to Lacan and Winnicott respectively, during the "mirror phase" or the period of the maternal "mirroring function."¹⁶

This basic body image and the sonic environment of which it is an elaboration are described by the psychoanalytic authors in terms of the dual function of accommodating *space* and delineating form—a duality that brings to mind the simultaneously metonymical and metaphorical birdlike image of the poet "on his Birthday" and accounts, perhaps, for the spatial experience of subjective ontology which it reflects. The body image is, thus, both "the palpable place where the subject can maintain

[*tenir*] his self, or alternatively, his body," and "a form where the subject can represent and articulate himself."¹⁷ "here I am."¹⁸ Succeeding a postulated primordial "foetal image,"¹⁹ the acoustic image is maintained within the fluid aerial space—a fluidity which recalls the water-air pair in Thomas's "Poem in October"—of a "sonic placenta" ("*placenta sonore*")²⁰ and "sonic bath" ("*bain sonore*").²¹ The function of these is to contain or provide a "holding environment"²² for the infant so that the evolution of his body image and sense of wholeness may take place as it were "*in the listening* [. . .]." At the same time, however, the early acoustic spaces also introduce the infant with a sense of form that guarantees the formation of his/her identity through an eventual entry into the symbolic order of language. The primal body image is a *structured* auditory space, organized prosodically and melodically by the inscriptions of the body's rhythms as well as by speech intonations and rhythmic patterns that form an acoustic Gestalt.²³ Thus, the elaboration of the basic body image is founded not only on unmediated perceptions and other somatic functions, but also on *semiotic* representations of inter-subjective relationships. In other words, the primary acoustic space is not merely an aerial reproduction of the nostalgic, autistic comfort of the womb, but is also a *relational space* where "the image of the body refers the subject of desire to his pleasure, mediated by the remembered language of the communication between subjects."²⁴ The relational, form-giving aspect of the primary acoustic environment is configured in the notion of a "sonic mirror,"²⁵ which alludes to Lacan's analogous notion of the foundation of the infant's sense of the unity of his body in the "mirror phase." Even as Lacan's scopic mirror reflects the body's imaginary wholeness by identificatory adherence to the "gaze of the Other," so the (chronologically prior) acoustic mirror embodies a recognition, by way of attribution, of an "other" as the source of its form-giving voice ("*la voix-source*").²⁶ (The abstracted origin of that originary voice finds its configuration in numerous myths of creation by song, breath and speech, including, of course, the biblical myth to which Thomas alludes in his sacramental invocation of the "said" world.)

By providing at once a sense of containing plenitude and of other-related form, the early acoustic space imagined by psychoanalysts constitutes,

in its heterogeneity, a conjunction of the biological and the semiological origins of the subject's identifying embodiment. This site is not unlike Thomas's in "Poem in October," where *water* and *name* converge in the fluid space of natural and codified sounds to generate a signifying subject "in the listening" (also) to an *other*. In this view, the experience of the "boy in the listening" is a reenactment of the archaic genesis of the speaking subject through entrance into the order of language—by listening to a voice that at once restores, in its materiality, the archaic unity of the "water" and designates its loss—by "flying its *name*."

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NOTES

¹My reading of Thomas in terms of the poet's realization of a desire for self-generation through the poetic practice, as well as its theoretical premises, were developed in my *Once Below a Time: Dylan Thomas, Julia Kristeva, and Other Speaking Subjects* (Albany: State U of New York P, 2000). By distinction from the previous work, however, the orientation of the reading in this essay is not psychoanalytic, except for the last part, where new psychoanalytically oriented theoretical notions are introduced and brought to bear on a Thomas poem.

²Walter J. Ong, S.J., *The Presence of the Word* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1981) 2.

³On Winnicott's notion of intermediary, or "transitional" spaces, see D. W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," *Playing and Reality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985).

⁴Needless to say, perhaps, "one" here is not only the reader/listener, but also the poet as listener, who listens not only to his own speech, but also to the reverberation of language as "other" and to the being of others who participate in it.

⁵*The Listening Self: Personal Growth, Social Change and the Closure of Metaphysics* (London: Routledge, 1989).

⁶*Collected Poems: 1934-1952* (London: Dent, 1973) 129-40. Unless indicated otherwise, all the quotations from Thomas's poems in this paper are from this edition, and all the emphases in them are mine.

⁷*The Notebooks of Dylan Thomas*, ed. Ralph Maud (London: New Directions, 1967) 111.

⁸My reading refers to the sower's parable in Matthew 13 and Mark 4. "[. . .] A sower went out to sow, and when he sowed, some seeds fell by the wayside, and the fowls

came and devoured them up. Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and [. . .] because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell upon thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them. But others fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit." (Matthew 13:3-18). The seed, representing the Word and its incorporation as faith, is specified as a *mustard* seed in Mark 4:31. Its drowning is projected—in my reading of Thomas's poem—by reference to the enactment of the parable later in the same chapter, where Jesus, having resumed his narration, tests the disciples' faith by a subjecting them to a didactic storm.

⁹Letter to Marguerite Caetani, in *The Collected Letters of Dylan Thomas*, ed. Paul Ferris (London: Dent, 1985) 915-16.

¹⁰"The child is father of the Man" is the concluding line of William Wordsworth's poem, "My Heart Leaps Up," and the opening one in the epigraph in "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood" (*The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th ed., gen. ed. M. H. Abrams [New York: Norton, 2000] 2: 285 and 287-92).

¹¹"But the Names Remain: Dylan Thomas's *Return Journey*," *Connotations* 8.1 (1998/99): 107-08.

¹²William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," ll. 148-52.

¹³I am grateful to Leona Toker for pointing out the aspect of "negative capability" in Thomas's poem, in a comment she made on this reading of it at the *Connotations* Symposium in Halberstadt in August 1999.

¹⁴Listen for the /w/ assonance and the /k/ and /b/ consonance, and you might hear the rustle of an intra-uterine ultra-sound in "woke to my hearing [. . .] the morning beckon with water praying and call of seagull and rook and the knock of sailing boats on the net webbed wall."

¹⁵Didier Anzieu, "L'enveloppe Sonore du Soi," *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse* 13 (1976): 76, my translation.

¹⁶According to Lacan and Winnicott's views (synthesized), in the period between the ages of six to eighteen months, the infant experiences a primary sense of identity or identifying unity by dint of identification with an image which presents itself in the mirror of another, notably the mother's gaze. While Lacan emphasizes the formal aspect of the mirroring, which reflects the illusory image of a unified body—a "total Gestalt" that serves as a basis for the illusion of the ego, Winnicott refers more to the affective aspect of the mother's confirming response through facial expressions, which consolidates the infant's sense of identity and reality, or "self." See Jacques Lacan's "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I in psychoanalytic experience" *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London and New York: Norton 1977) 1-7, and D. W. Winnicott's "Mirror-role of Mother and Family in Child Development," *Playing and Reality* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985).

¹⁷Françoise Dolto, in an interview with Juan David Nasio in *L'enfant du Miroir* (Paris: Editions Rivages, 1987) 13-14, quoted by Dominique Ducard in his essay, "Forme et Métaphore," *L'Esprit des Voix: Etudes sur la Fondation Vocale* (Paris: La Pensée Sauvage, 1990) 136, my translation.

¹⁸Or, more precisely and more faithfully with regard to the process of recognizing oneself in the mirror, "here-me-I": "*ici-moi-je*" (Ducard, "Forme et Metaphore" 136, my translation).

¹⁹Françoise Dolto, *L'image inconsciente du corps* (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 1984), cited by Ducard in "Forme et Metaphore" 135, my translation.

²⁰Dominique Ducard, *La Voix et le Miroir: Généalogies de la voix et de la parole*, doctoral dissertation in semiology (U of Paris, 1989) 86-87.

²¹Didier Anzieu writes about the formation of "the self [. . .] as a sonic envelopment [*enveloppe sonore*] in the experience of a bath of sounds" (*bain de sons*) in "L'Enveloppe Sonore du Soi" 173, my translation.

²²Winnicott's term refers to the function of maternal care facilitating the development of the child's sense of self through the gradual imaginary elaboration of his/her psychosomatic reality.

²³Dominique Ducard, "Forme et Metaphore," esp. 141.

²⁴Ducard, "Forme et Metaphore" 135, my translation.

²⁵Anzieu 162. See Ducard's elaboration of the term in, "Forme et Metaphore," and in *La Voix et le Miroir*.

²⁶Ducard, "Forme" 134, my translation.