



Dylan Thomas's In the Direction of the Beginning: Towards or beyond meaning?

Morgan George

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Dylan Thomas's *In the Direction of the Beginning* : Towards or beyond meaning ?

George Morgan

George Morgan teaches poetry at the University of Nice-Sophia Antipolis. He has worked extensively and intensively on Welsh and Irish poetry in English. His thesis, "L'Espace dans la Poésie de Dylan Thomas" (Paris III, 2000), develops many of the themes hinted at in the present article.

This article, focussing "In the Direction of the Beginning", on an early "symbolic" short story by Dylan Thomas, attempts to unveil an underlying mesh of meaning, mostly auto-referential in character, whereby the poem literally becomes the writer's own world with its spaces, processes, dimensions and dynamics. "Reality" is thus perceived in terms of the creative experience unfolding on and in the page. Thomas's writing is shown to be a multi-layered complex featuring various strategies aimed at attracting and retaining the reader's interest while simultaneously deconstructing the linear meaning in a series of creations and de-creations, which are a mark of Thomas early prose as of much of his poetry. Emerging through this surface level of pseudo-narrative and indecipherable imagery, the auto-reflexive stratum provides less a meaning than a formal structural underpinning and a new symbolic dimension allowing an indefinitely variable and ultimately ungraspable interplay of word and image. The insight provided by this story is perhaps most useful as an approach to the creative process underlying Thomas's poetry.

Much of Dylan Thomas's early work, whether in verse or prose, is notoriously obscure and initial critical response to the poems and stories produced during the years of intense creativity prior to 1939 ranged largely from the bemused to the frankly hostile. Stephen Spender, among other contemporaries, bemoaned the shapelessness and meaninglessness of his work : "The truth is that Thomas's poetry is turned on like a tap ; it is just poetic stuff with no beginning nor end, shape or intelligent or intelligible control"¹.

More than half a century of Thomas criticism has largely answered Spender's charges of unintelligibility as gloss upon gloss has revealed the almost inexhaustible suggestiveness of his symbolism. Antagonism to Thomas's early manner, however, has not entirely abated. Indeed, it appears even to have been fed by the plethora of potential readings. A recent and otherwise sympathetic Thomas commentator, John Ackerman, has berated the earlier collections for their "inwardly turned and highly poetic imagination", a stricture in which "poetic imagination" takes on a strangely deprecatory slant. His clearly stated preference lies with the later post-1939 poems and stories which abandon the "introspective intensities" and move "outward to the world around him, both realistically observed and exactly recollected."² Critical response is, of course, largely governed by readers' expectations and assumptions about the nature of literature and its relation to the real. It may well prove difficult to persuade a reader seeking the certainties of descriptive realism of the more arcane and subjective delights of imaginative word-play and semantic uncertainty that characterises Thomas's early work. The aim of this paper, however, is to demonstrate that Thomas's creative writing, far from being a shapeless flow of meaningless images, is deliberately and intricately constructed to convey a meaningful experience, even if "meaning" is not to be taken in the conventional sense of intellectual significance. By a close reading of a single short story - "In the Direction

¹ Quoted by Thomas in a letter to Henry Treece, May 16th, 1938, in *The Collected Letters of Dylan Thomas*, ed. FERRIS, Paul, (London, Dent, 1985) p.297.

² Ackerman, John, *A Dylan Thomas Companion* (London, Macmillan, 1991) p. 178.

of the Beginning”, published in review form in Wales in March 1938 but uncollected until the posthumous publication of *A Prospect of the Sea and Other Short Stories* in 1955, presumably on account of the esoteric nature of the text - I intend to show the mesh of interconnected signifiers and levels of discourse which do in fact build up a series of overlapping meanings while transforming the text less into a narrative than an event beyond time and perhaps even beyond meaning in the usual sense of the term.

A first problem to be solved when confronting a Thomas text is not “What does it mean?” but “What kind of meaning does it have?” The observations made in the context of this prose piece also apply, to varying degrees, to other poems and stories at the same period, and even beyond into Thomas’s more “accessible” stage after the publication of *The Map of Love* in 1939. This story, a kind of prose-poem written in a single paragraph, was originally planned by Thomas as a fragment of a more ambitious piece referred to, in correspondence to Vernon Watkins, as the “World story”³. As it stands, however, it is complete in itself and, with its dense and pyrotechnical use of language, it marks the culmination, though not the swan song, of Thomas’s early style.

For purposes of convenience, the text is reproduced here in full :

[For copyright reasons, the full text of Dylan Thomas’s story cannot be quoted on line. Please consult either the paper version of *Cycnos*, Vol. 20, N°2, 2003 or the original text in *Collected Stories*, J.M. Dent & Son, London, 1983, pp. 115-116.]

I will endeavour to show that this text deploys, as do many of Thomas’s works, three distinct but closely interrelated modes of writing which I will call the pre-text, the anti-text and the con-text. In the first, the pre-text, Thomas advances, or feigns to advance, a linear discourse or narrative as a form of lure to entertain the reader and retain his/her attention while the language performs its real task on a different level. By means of the anti-text, the writer accumulates stylistic strategies aimed at thwarting or undermining the establishment of the linear narrative or description previously described. Labyrinthine twists and turns of language deliberately transform obscurity and illegibility into a poetic strategy. Finally, the con-text performs the blending of two parallel strata of discourse, the surface level of narrative and a concealed yet coherent stratum of suggestion. It is the co-existence and interplay of these two strata which support the diversity and underlying cohesion of Thomas’s writing despite its apparent reconditeness.

A narrative pre-text – a “world story”

Paradoxically, the early Thomas, though a resolutely obscure poet, was also a firm advocate of clear narrative, and all the more so as the text was subjectively esoteric : “Narrative is essential, he wrote in 1934, there must be a progressive line, or theme, of movement in every poem...The more subjective a poem the clearer the narrative line.”⁴ Hence, despite the imagistic and syntactical density of our text, multiple markers, especially initially, point to the existence of an underlying structuring narrative, a story of birth, journeying and love. The “beginning” adumbrated in the title is that of a story which appears to unfold within the parameters of conventional reality. The temporal setting, spring and evening, is referred to throughout the text (“great spring evening”, “spring of the topsy-turvy year”, “evening centred”, etc.). The narrative space is the expanding but eminently recognizable dimension of the “real” world : “light tent”, “swinging field”, “sea”, “ocean’s end”. A natural backdrop is hinted at persistently throughout (“water”, “birds”, “mountains”, “salty field”, “foam”, “island

³ Letter to Vernon Watkins postmarked 21st March 1938. *The Collected Letter of Dylan Thomas*, (London, Dent, 1985), p.279. According to Watkins, this piece was a « fragment of a work in progress ».

⁴ Answer to 1934 New Verse questionnaire, reproduced in SINCLAIR, Andrew, *Dylan Thomas Poet of his people*, (London, Michael Joseph , 1975) p.219.

shape", "clouds to sea") while details of human artefacts add to the illusion ("shingled boat", "a folded salmon sail", etc). A whole network of images thus seems to suggest the plausibility and coherence of what the text itself alludes to as a "sculptured world".

Against this temporal-spatial background, multiple references scattered through the text create the illusion of narrative action, with a cast of anonymous but vividly described characters acting out a somewhat strange and disjointed drama which I will attempt here to piece together. A "man" is "born" in circumstances suggesting a cosmic birth – "the moon had raised him through the mountains in her eyes"(13)⁵. Confronted with time – "wrestled over the edge of evening"(16) – this hero-figure engages in a series of quasi-mythical actions : "he... took to the beginning as a goose to the sky, and called his furies by their names..."(16-18). Opposite him, there emerges an equally mysterious siren : "Who was this stranger...a snow-leaved bush for her hair, and taller than a cedarmast"(18-19). She too takes on a cosmic dimension as the text unfolds : "salt and white and travelling as the field...her hands upon the treetops"(23-25). The narrative is invested with the characteristics of a folk-tale, an "enchantment"(35) to quote the text itself, laden with familiar mythical and biblical allusions : odyssey, cyclops, the gorgon ("serpent-haired"(40)), Revelation and Genesis. Though not obviously lovers, the "man" and the "woman" move gradually through difference towards union. She appears to be identified with life, movement and sound : "She moved in the swallowing salty field...She raged in the mule's womb...She was loud in the old grave..."(49-52). He, for his part, is described as a sailor "a shoreman in deep sea (35)", a Ulyssean quester engaged in mapping his world, which is none other than the woman herself : "He marked her outcast image, mapped with a nightmare's foot"(53-54). As the story draws to a close, the long, meandering sentences become shorter and more climactic : "She raged in the mule's womb. She altered in the galloping dynasty(51-52)." Until, finally, the two characters merge mysteriously into one, a single voice travelling the sea : "One voice then in that evening travelled the light and water waves"(59), their mystical marriage now symbolised by the completed map and the island shape : "from the four map corners one cherub in an island shape puffed the clouds to sea(62-63)." Allusive though it is, the text ultimately contains all the features and stages of a traditional narrative : exposition, conflict, enigma, complexification and dénouement.

Moreover, Thomas intensifies the impression of a sequential discourse and controlled narrative by injecting elements of narratorial guidance and reflection. An omniscient narrative voice asks a series of questions throughout the text, as though to elucidate the mysterious protagonists : "Who was this stranger who came like a hailstone...?"(18-19). Or again about the nature of this genesis : "Which was her genesis...Whose was the image in the wind?"(42-47) These are the same questions which the reader could well be asking but which, at this stage, remain unanswered.

Finally, in this pseudo-narrative pre-text, the language itself is designed to suggest logical semantic coherence within the text. Multiple connectors at the beginnings of sentences ("as", "and", "then" etc), the accumulation of verbs of action suggesting succession ("she scaled and drew...she plucked ...and tore etc.", the frequent use of progressive forms "went drowning", "bore him singing" etc.), all help to maintain the impression of onward movement and the presence of continuity and coherence within the text. To this could be added the dynamic and expansive rhythm of the passage which carries the reader forward in ever longer syntactical segments. The opening sentence provides a classic example with its division into expanding sections of 4, 5, 6 and 15 and 15 syllables – "In the light tent / in the swinging field / in the great spring evening,/ near the sea and the shingled boat with a mast of cedarwood,/"

⁵ The figures in brackets refer, for the main quotations, to the line number of the text as printed above.

the hinderwood decked with beaks and shells, a folded, salmon sail,”(1-3). Before rounding off firmly on three strongly stressed monosyllables – “and two finned oars”.

This narrative pre-text with its accompanying stylistic devices plays a number of roles in the economy of Thomas’s text. Firstly, it provides a structuring technique to bind an otherwise straggling narrative. It is no doubt a truism that any work of art requires the constraint of a formal frame or boundaries, all the more so when the content, as with Thomas, is so exuberant and expansive. In response to Stephen Spender’s jibe, Thomas argued his case firmly : “Spender’s remark is really the exact opposite of what is true. My poems are formed ; they are not turned on like a tap at all, they are ‘watertight compartments’⁶ While scarcely “watertight”, the narrative element in “In the Direction of the Beginning” is largely there to provide an element of intelligible control and to prevent the imagery from merely sprawling formlessly over the page.

A second purpose of the narrative pre-text is to engage reader with the promise of a coherent story. Not that Thomas intended this cogent discourse as an end in itself. “I believe in the thread of action through the poem”, he wrote to Henry Treece, but that is an intellectual thing aimed at lucidity through narrative”⁷ Rather, in the wake of T.S. Eliot, his aim was to use narrative as a bait or psycholinguistic subterfuge aimed at satisfying, with the aim of deceiving, the expectations of the reader accustomed to linear discourse. Once the reader’s mind was lured into the poem by the rational discourse, the poem, albeit a prose poem, could go about its work on another, more subversive, level : “The chief use of meaning in a poem, he wrote to Glyn Jones in March 1934, may be to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work on him”⁸. And this subversive process will consist, strangely, in a second stage aimed at destabilising the very features of narrative discourse which the poem has been at such pains to create.

The anti-text : a “rant of odyssey”

At this point, I need to explain another major aspect of Thomas’s poetic technique, what he called his “dialectic method”. an ongoing process of creative destruction and destructive creation : “any sequence of my images, Thomas writes, must be a sequence of creations, recreations, destructions and contradictions”.⁹ The aim of this technique is to set up a tension within the text between the creation of and the breaking down of significance, A meaning which is established by an image or phrase is then undermined or deconstructed by the advent of another potential meaning which in its turn will be replaced by another. In this approach no single meaning takes precedence. All meanings remain possible in a multivalent and shifting relationship of foregrounding and backgrounding of simultaneous potentials. The impact of this technique is to prevent any single sense from emerging and thus subverting linear discourse in favour of a mode of language capable of holding diverse possibilities in dynamic and inextricable suspense. Aimed at producing multiple meanings in an ongoing creative and destructive process, the text remains at the same time teasingly mysterious and ungraspable.

I can no more than hint here at the many linguistic stratagems devised to this end by Thomas in the text under study, as elsewhere. Lexical deconstruction is perhaps the easiest with which to begin. By this technique Thomas disrupts our usual word-associations in order to release diverse alternative meanings. “Swinging field”(1), in the otherwise limpid opening sentence, offers an example. While the tent and nearby sea fully justify the reference to the “field”, the adjective “swinging” is singularly perplexing. In what sense can a field be said to “swing”? Does it suggest a physical swaying movement? Some rhythmical or musical oscillation? The

⁶ Letter to Henry Treece, dated 16th May, 1938, *Collected Letters* (London, Dent, 1985) p. 298.

⁷ Letter to Henry Treece, dated 23rd March 1938, *Collected Letters* (London, Dent, 1985) p. 281.

⁸ Letter to Glyn Jones, dated 14th March, 1934, *Collected Letters*, (London, Dent, 1985)

⁹ Letter to Henry Treece, dated 23.3.38, *Collected Letters*, *ibid.*, p.281.

alternating exercise of power? And if any or all of these, what is the nature of the field? No longer a mere camping-site, at all events, as we will see below. The reader is left in suspense juggling with the various unresolved potentials. With increasing frequency as the text progresses, Thomas offers even more complex lexical conundrums in which the conventional meanings or associations of words are confounded and placed in strange and challenging new combinations : “assassin avatar undead and numbered waves”(12) ; “she was salt and white and travelling as the field”(23) ; “comb-footed scavenger’s wind”(32-33) ; “she raged in the mule’s womb”(51). In examples such as these, the incongruity of the lexical combinations seems to point less to a surrealistic and illogical confusion than to the possibility of alternative meanings lurking in the interstices of the words. Could the sterile “mule’s womb”, in the last of these examples, carry a reference not merely to the animal but to a more generic hybrid - “one who is neither one thing nor the other”(O.E.D.) - an image possibly of the compound, ambivalent nature of Thomas’s language? Could “womb” then signify more generically, “a place or medium of conception”, perhaps the poem itself leading us “In the direction of the beginning”? Finally, could the “raging” then signify not only an expression of anger, but also the often confused but poetic expression of inspiration, similar again to the “rant of odyssey”? “Rage, rage against the dying of the light”, wrote Thomas in a now famous poem. The text provides no answer, no certainties, only the shifting ambivalence which is the instrument of Thomas’s semantic denseness and obscurity but also of his tantalizing richness.

Similar in principle, but more complex in its arrangements and effects, is the process of grammatical disarticulation the text undergoes at several points. Syntax and grammar are distorted and disrupted, throwing into confusion what had come to resemble an emerging linear narrative. The first sentence, for instance, beginning with an accumulation of prepositional phrases in an apparently orderly description of the field and sea-side, is broken by the punctuation into three distinct and increasingly unrelated noun segments, the verb occurring belatedly and by now somewhat incongruously in the thirteenth line. Grammatically, as well as semantically, the connection between the field, the birds overhead and the “rocks of history” is anything but clear. Combined with the lexical density and ambivalence, this syntactical fracturing thwarts the search for a single and coherent narrative line overturning the world of ordered reality into a universe of word, image and perplexing combinations.

More frequently, Thomas submits his narrative to a process of semantic deconstruction whereby the logic of the narrative is dislocated by the injection of incongruous images and associations. The apparently conventional description of the flights of birds in the first sentence (“with gulls in one flight high over, stork, pelican, and sparrow, flying to the ocean’s end”(4-5)) is suddenly subverted by a discordant and unfathomable allusion to “the first grain of a timeless land that spins on the head of a sandglass, a hoop of feathers down the dark of the spring in a topsy-turvy year”(5-7). Increasingly, the text accumulates implausible and enigmatic associations of images : “a snow-leaved seabush for her hair, and taller than a cedarmast”(19-20) ; “a siren stranger’s vision of grass and waterbeast and snow”(27-28). At times indeed, like the “stranger’s vision” referred to here, the text itself verges on the hallucinatory delirium of a psychedelic fantasy : “a cloud half flower half ash or the comb-footed scavenger’s wind through a pyramid raised high with the mud...”(32-33). Though imaginatively stimulating by their very strangeness, such images impede the construction of a coherent message more than they contribute to it.

Thomas’s text undoubtedly recounts a cosmogony, a world coming into being. However, the world created is progressively and systematically transmogrified into a bewildering landscape bearing no connection with the realistic and homely setting depicted in the opening lines. The modes of distortion are too various to analyse in detail here but include spatial disparities and incongruities (“born in the direction of the beginning”(12-13) ; “he wrestled over the edge of

evening”(16) ; “the mountains in her eyes”(14), unlikely juxtapositions of attributes (“assassin avatar undead and numbered waves”(12) ; “full of tides and fingers”(15), baffling mergings of the abstract and the concrete, the precise and the vague (“In the exact centre of enchantment, he was a shoreman in deep sea”(34-35), accumulations of bizarre and indecipherable events composed of disparate participants (“The world was sucked to the last lake’s drop ; the cataract of the last particle worried in a lather to the ground, as if the rain from heaven had let its cloud fall turtle-turning like a manna made of the soft-bellied seasons...”(28-31)). The impression created is of a precise and pressing action, but what precisely is far from clear. After the initial realism, the story adopts a bemusingly fantastic mode one would be tempted to qualify as surrealistic if it were not for Thomas’s insistent rebuttal of any literary connection with Surrealism¹⁰. While the grammatical and syntactical arrangements grow more limpid as the text progresses, the lexical allusions and metaphorical combinations become even more bizarre and extreme, rupturing any relation the text had achieved with conventional discursive logic or narrative intelligibility. Seen from this angle, the world evoked is little more than an indecipherable cataract of words and sound, a form of mytho-poetic divagation reminiscent of the “rant of odyssey”(10) or the “echo knocking to be answered”(48) referred to in the story itself.

And yet the text does carry the reader along with its pseudo-logic and rhetorical questionings, its semblance of narrative and forceful rhythms. The dogged reader who has not yet been thrown by so much perplexity senses a pattern and an underpinning coherence behind these evocations and anonymous characters. The questions raised by the narrator are precisely those the curious reader might do well to ask : “Who was this stranger who came like a hailstone, cut in ice...Which was her genesis....Whose was the image in the wind, the print on the cliff, the echo knocking to be answered?” (18-48)

The text as con-text – the telling of a creation

While the pre-text narrative aims to carry the reader into the text, the anti-text, as we have outlined it, is aimed principally at preventing the reader from reaching any hasty conclusions as to the meaning or direction of the text. By disrupting our lexical associations, obstructing ready-made meanings, dislocating the narrative line, the anti-text injects a series of ruptures in the discourse which undermine any readerly certainties and create a space of indetermination in which alternative readings become both necessary and available. Indeed, the text is a con-text in the sense that it combines two distinct yet interfering semantic planes. Far from closing down the path to meaning, this creative-destructive approach opens up a new space of language, a new potential for image and metaphor, a whole world of imagination in fact.

What sense then, if any, does the text make? The answer, as with most things related to Thomas, is complex, and at least binary. Firstly, it is my conviction that Thomas has underpinned the narrative with a strangely idiosyncratic but coherent iconography. Here, as in the poems, the poet reconciles two levels of expression : “I, in my intricate image, stride on two levels”, he writes in another famous early poem¹¹. Beneath the disjointed and obscure surface narrative, there lies a cogent stratum of symbolic imagery and reference. This logic is auto-reflexive in character, the story or adventure unfolded by the text describes the nature of the text itself, its shape and movements, as well as the creative process which brought it into being.

¹⁰ “I am not, never have been, never will be, or could be for that matter, a surrealist, and for a number of reasons : I have very little idea what surrealism is ; until quite recently I had never heard of it...”, Letter to Richard Church, poetry editor at J.M. Dent, dated 9.12.35, *The Collected Letters of Dylan Thomas*, *ibid*, pp. 204-5.

¹¹ « I in my intricate image », *Collected Poems 1934-1953*, ed. Walford Davies & Ralph Maud (London, Dent, 1988) p.33.

The world created in the story represents, I would suggest, on one level at least, the microcosm of the work itself and its making symbolically transposed. The dream of genesis related in terms suggestive of poetic creation is prevalent in both poems and prose at this period. "I followed sleep", published in 1933 describes the process more explicitly in images similar to those of *In the Direction of the Beginning* :

Then all the matter of the living air
 Raised up a voice, and climbing on the words,
 I spelt my vision with a hand and hair,
 How light the sleeping on this soily star,
 How deep the waking in the worlded clouds.¹²

In another story, "The Mouse and the Woman", published two years before "In the Direction of the Beginning", Thomas deploys many of the themes and even the images of the latter text. Thus, an anonymous main character, a writer, recounts the process of the creation of a woman figure in terms of a birth and, more specifically, of the creation of the poem upon the page before him :

Had she not been in the beginning, there would have been no beginning. She had moved in his belly when he was a boy, and stirred in his boy's loins. He at last gave birth to her who had been with him from the beginning...It is not a little thing, he thought, this writing that lies before me. It is the telling of a creation. It is the story of birth. Out of him had come another. A being had been born, not out of the womb, but out of the soul and the spinning head...He understood what the wind that took up the woman's cry had cried in his last dream. His flesh would be upon her, and the life that he had given her would make her walk, talk, and sing. And he knew, too, that it was on the block of paper that she was made absolute. There was an oracle in the lead of pencil.¹³

A first hint of this submerged meta-literary dimension is provided by the significant number of terms or images used which apply directly, or indirectly through metaphor and subsidiary meanings, to the process of literary creation, whether script, or the production of language and sound : scrawled, odyssey, history, numbered, names, index, -leafed, hand, voices, vision, music, Revelation, scaled, singing, voice(2), spout, image(2), print(2), chronicle, interrogation. On occasion, the meta-literary reference is disguised behind an obscure meaning or archaism. To give just a few instances, "furies"(17) can refer to poetic frenzy as well as to a snake-haired goddess of Greek mythology. The whale in "the whale-driven sea cast up to the caves of the eye"(21-22) refers not only to the sea-mammal but also to an absurd statement¹⁴, very similar, it would appear, to Thomas's own text. "Particle" in "the cataract of the last particle", also signifies "a very small part of any proposition, writing ; a clause"(OED), the "cataract" referring, no doubt, to the rush of the words just inscribed upon the page.

On their own, such references, however numerous, do not constitute a coherent account, or "meaning". They are, however, supported by other more oblique or metaphorical references which do appear to supply an underlying pattern. Basically, Thomas adopts two techniques. The first is a phenomenological approach in which objects or actions are perceived in their generic essence or function, most often close to a dictionary definition. To take an example found frequently throughout the text, "stone", with its various isomorphisms (grain, sand, rocks, mountains, hailstone, stone-turning, granite, sculptured, vault,) comes to signify "a small piece of durable material used in building" and hence, in Thomas's construction, the separate words spread across the page. The plural, agglomerated or constructed manifestations of stone (rocks, mountains, granite, sculptured, vault etc) thus suggest the text seen as a whole architecturally structured body. The references to "the stone-turning voice"(40-41) or again to

¹² *Collected Poems 1934-1953*, *ibid.*, p. 25

¹³ *Collected Stories*, *ibid.*, p.75.

¹⁴ As in Hamlet's "very like a whale" (III.ii.399)

“the chronicle and the rocks”(50-51) refer in turn to the text as story and an assemblage of words just as, in the concluding lines of the text, “the granite fountain extinguishing”(56-57), “cast in the sculptured world”(57) and “the last vault”(58) symbolise, in their different ways, the almost concluded text, now immobilised and fashioned in its final artistic compaction and structure of words. Among other parallel references in Thomas’s poetry, one might usefully quote the “monumental / Argument of the hewn voice” in “After the funeral”¹⁵, a poem revised in 1938, the same year as “In the Direction of the Beginning”, in which the burial stone comes to stand for the poem itself as verbal memorial.

A second technique involves what I would call a “literal” approach. Simply put, this means that the narrative described by the text is the account of the shapes, movements and processes that the poet – and reader – experience through the creation, or reading, of the text. Literality, in this sense, is not opposed to metaphor. Rather, it designates the immediate reality of the poetic process. The world described is, quite literally, the world of the work in progress. Thus, the “Beginning” in the title suggests the birth of the text itself while the various features of this genesis relate the creative operations which gave it life. The man “born in the direction of the beginning”(12-13) refers, in this reading, to the poet himself or, more accurately, to the deliberate, conscious self of the writer as he arranges or “directs” the text emerging before him. The act of calling “his furies by their names”(17-18) alludes here to the translation of the poetic frenzy into words. This naming of furies gives rise to a second genesis, that of the strange woman figure who dominates much of the story. With her “siren stranger’s vision”(27), she would appear to embody the manifestation of the poetic frenzy, the product of the poet’s imaginative labour. Appropriately, she is constantly identified with the creation of sound and language : “her fingers flowed over the voices”(25-26). She is the medium by which the male protagonist is embodied in music : “his swept thighs strung among her voice”(36-37) ; “she...bore him singing into light through the forest of the serpent-haired and the stone-turning voice.”(39-41). Fittingly again, the end of the text describes a conjunction of the two characters, a blending of imaginative depths and the life of language. She, the visionary depths of imagination, is now “loud”, expressing her vision on a “still, quick tongue” suggesting both the fixity of language and its vitalising character. He, the maker and organiser, is now fulfilled as he “marks” and “maps” her vision in terms which suggest, metaphorically, the organisational function of poetic language : “He marked her outcast image, mapped with a nightmare’s foot in poison and framed against the wind, print of her thumb that buckled in its hand with a webbed shadow, interrogation of the familiar echo”.(53-56). As the story reaches a conclusion, this fusion of maker and vision produces the single voice of the completed work, as one “lineament(60)” - etymologically a “mind-pattern of lines” - encompasses all the shifting states of mind or “sliding moods” which characterize the story : “One voice then in that evening travelled the light and water waves, one lineament took on the sliding moods, from where the gold green sea cantharis dyes the trail of the octopus(59-61). The final image of this sentence is perhaps worth explicating here as it provides a particularly striking example of the complexity, strangeness and yet cogency of Thomas’s creative technique. The octopus is recruited here first for its tentacular shape, sprawling and sliding across the ocean bed like the lines of the text upon the page. Secondly, its inky “trail” serves to evoke the printed characters of the words themselves. In addition, it is suggested, the black ink is “dyed” by the cantharis or Spanish fly, an insect and aphrodisiac reputed for its promotion of the merging of opposites. Thomas means, in other words, that they are transformed, diversified and embellished by the creative act, seen precisely as a reconciliation of contraries.

¹⁵ « After the Funeral”, *Collected Poems, 1934-1953*, *ibid.*, p.74.

Reconstructing this symbolic and oneiric system is a painstaking task and one which Thomas probably never expected his readers to undertake as extensively and as deliberately as I have done here. However, the effort is rewarded by the revelation of imaginative and semantic coherence which this symbolic underpinning lends to many of his poems and stories. Without seeking to be exhaustive, I will provide a few further instances of the process.

Much of the description in the text turns around images of water and land. Though appropriate enough for a story said to take place in a field by the sea, the strangeness of many of the allusions and images points to an alternative purpose. Let us return for a moment to our enigmatic “swinging field” in the opening line, echoed, as it is, by the description of the siren “salt and white and travelling as the field”(23) and again by a further reference to the siren : “She moved in the swallowing, salty field, the chronicle and the rocks...”(49-50) The reader can only remain perplexed by such bizarreness. We have already highlighted the incongruity of the “swinging field”, further compounded here by the suggestion that the field both “travels” and “swallows”. The answer lies once again in Thomas’s customised use of language and his injection of submerged auto-reflexive lexical associations. Thus, I submit, “field” is used in the generic sense of “an area of action, operation, or investigation”(OED) and alludes, by its shape and function, to the space of the page on which the story is written. “Swinging”, in this reading, suggests quite literally the back and forth movement of the text on the page. “Travelling” expresses the forward movement down the page, a page which is naturally white and “salt” on account of the pungent, creative-destructive nature of the language used. “Swallowing”, while suggesting the text devouring the space upon the page could also, and aptly, refer to the text’s propensity to repress or “swallow” the story’s sublimated message. By an extension of this spatial logic, logical perhaps only in the context of Thomas’s convoluted imaginative world, allusions to other enclosed terrestrial spaces, whether “the floating island”(22) or the final “island shape”(63) arrived at in the final line, or again the “old grave” in which, strangely, the siren “was loud”, also come to signify the movement, function and shape of the text upon the page.

Though distinct in its properties and dynamics, the sea also lends itself to this foregrounding of the poetic process. The “rant of odyssey” thus describes the epic of the text itself with its extravagant language as it journeys towards the “ocean’s end”(5), the completion of the story perceived as a “blown sea”(16), namely, a proclaimed or uttered expanse of “undead and numbered waves”(12), the lines of musically disposed script moving and living down the page. As the story ends, the “water waves” now carry a single voice : “One voice then in that evening travelled the light and water waves, one lineament took on the sliding moods...”(59-60). A world of movement, “the anchored sea”(50) also suggests, like several other references, (stone-turning voice, over its transfixed shoulder, still, quick tongue, granite fountain, sculptured world, etc.) the combination of movement and fixity, that no doubt of the story itself moving across the page yet held for all time in the artistic form. Apparently esoteric elements of “maritime” description take on a new lease of meaning when viewed from this auto-reflexive perspective. Take, for instance, the segment “recorded for the rant of odyssey the dropping of the bay-leaf”(10-11). The bay-leaf, with its bizarre culinary connotations, takes on, in Thomas’s mode of word-use, a secondary but more relevant meaning as the leaf or printed sheet on which the bay or partly enclosed stretch of sea, here the text itself, is “dropping” down or descending the page. Similarly, the reference to “eyed arms that fall behind her”(15) takes on a sub-textual significance when seen in relation with the meta-literary allusion in the “blown sea”(16) where “blown” signifies “uttered, proclaimed, hinted at”(O.E.D.). Hence, to be explicit, the eyed arms are the arms of the sea, or lines of the text, which are “eyed” because read by the reader and also because they indicate the text’s direction - a frequent meaning of eye. The wind can be seen then, as often in Thomas’s poetry and prose, in the sense of poetic or inspired utterance. And these literary

“arms” “fall behind her” in the literal sense, also present in the later used segment “back from its transfixed shoulder”(41-42) by reference to the lines of prose now deposited in the wake of the text as it travels down the page.

Other aquatic images are absorbed into Thomas’s imaginative patterning in images too diverse and complex to be explicated in detail here. Suffice it to mention that “rain”, like “steam” and the various references to “clouds” suggest the notion of particles (of text, of words) held in suspension on or descending the page. Likewise, references to “ice”, “hail”, “snow”, “snow-leafed”, etc.) point to the particles of text immobilised, compacted or disposed in reticular fashion on the page.

The meta-literary underpinning of the narrative is present in every feature and aspect of Thomas’s imagery and lexicon. Indeed, his whole cosmography is a multifarious retelling of the genesis of the text itself, a cartography of a world of words both moving and static, multiple yet unified. In this context, every aspect of the description, allusions to air, fire, shapes, spaces, anatomy, movement, stillness, shaping, beginning and ending etc., contributes to a shifting and perplexing vision of the text in movement. The text can be symbolised, and often within the same utterance, by different families of imagery. Flame, for instance, is associated with stone and water “the granite fountain extinguishing by where the first flame is cast in the sculptured world”(56-57) ; or again, the wind is related with the imagery of sound, and earth “Whose was the image in the wind, the print on the cliff, the echo knocking to be answered?”(47-48). This polymorphous and fluctuating use of symbolism is a basic though perplexing feature of Thomas’s iconography, in his poems as in his prose. Symbols become interchangeable in a kaleidoscopic shifting of angle or perspective. The process is referred to explicitly in another similar story “Prologue to an Adventure” where the narrative voice is that of the images themselves : “We are all metaphors of the sound of shape of the shape of sound, break us we take another shape.”¹⁶ Most often imaged in terms of land and sea, the world of the poem/page is also alluded to symbolically in terms of all the elements. Of light : “she bore him singing into light”(39-40). Or of wind : “Whose was the image in the wind?”(47) Animals too, in their various ways, recall the movement of the text upon the page : “She was orioled and serpent haired”(48-49) where birds are evoked most often for their linear movement, like the words of the text, flying towards the story’s end : “stork, pelican, and sparrow, flying to the ocean’s end”(4-5) ; and the serpent for the meandering, back and forth movement of the text descending the page. Or again, Thomas will call frequently on anatomical images : “the dark anatomies”(50), “Revelation stared back from its transfixed shoulder”(41-42). In these instances, the poem is perceived in terms of a body, that of the man and woman who are embodied within it. Hence the numerous references to arms, hands, fingers, thighs, nerves, eyes, womb, hair, which all allude, in their diverse ways, to the organic and spatial organisation of the text itself. Anatomical images, among others, such as “Scrawled limb”(8), “swept thighs hung among her voice”(36-37), “print of her thumb”(54), “she scaled and drew with hands and fables”(38) take on a meaning and a significance in the light of the subtextual autoreflexive process they scarcely possess at surface narrative level.

Conclusion –“beyond meaning ?”

Though difficult by any standards and located at the extreme limit of readability, “In the Direction of the Beginning” is not a hermetic or esoteric text in the usual sense : there is no hidden message. The surface narrative is a device aimed to beguile the reader’s thinking brain, rather than inform or enlighten it. The submerged meta-literary dimension too contains little or nothing in terms of measured thought or belief. Complex though it is, it constitutes a fairly repetitive and scarcely enthralling description of the world of the text.

¹⁶ *The Collected Stories*, idem, p.106

So what kind of “meaning”, if any, does Thomas’s text have ?

“Meaning”, in the usual sense, was not Thomas’s primary aim in his poetry or symbolic prose. His was never a ratiocinatory nor even an emotion-based approach to literature : “I have always been struggling, he wrote to Pamela Hansford Johnson in 1933, with the idea of poetry as a thing entirely removed from such accomplishments as “word-painting” and the setting down of delicate but unusual emotions in a few well-chosen words”¹⁷. His delight, on the contrary, was in words alone and in their unique power to break down existing associations and habitual thoughts and feelings by the creation of new imaginative forms opening onto unexplored visionary spaces of the mind. “Poetry, he writes in the same letter, should have its own form ; form should never be superimposed ; the structure should rise out of the words and the expression of them. I do not want to express only what other people have felt ; I want to rip something away and show what they have never seen.”

“In the Direction of the Beginning”, I believe, is an extreme example of Thomas’s attempt to coax words into delivering a significance beyond meaning, just such a thing that “they have never seen”. It is an experiment not in conveying ideas or feelings but in organising words and sound to produce an imaginative experience emerging directly out of the interplay of words, rather than what the words convey, or appear to convey. This text, like many others, is more in the nature of a psychic happening or “adventure”, as Thomas entitles several of his prose pieces, in which the aesthetic pleasure stems from the reader’s participation in the ongoing, unforeseeable and uncontrollable processes of the poem. Its significance lies in its ability to take the reader to places and spaces of the mind unattainable by other non-verbal means. Ultimately, its very unreadability is the key to the pleasure it engenders.

Not surprisingly perhaps, Thomas the consummate wordsmith was convinced of the ultimate inadequacy of language to the task he set it. Indeed, his “mazy and difficult” idiom, as he described it in a letter to Pamela Hansford Johnson in May 1934, was an attempt to overcome the shortcomings of language by deploying it in a novel way intended less to communicate than to permit the experience of communion with the creative process itself. The quest for a “beginning” alluded to in the title of our text constitutes less a revisiting of Genesis than the search for a new language, fresh and ungraspable, and the first-hand experience of a magnificence and a beginning within the words themselves. As he wrote in the same letter in May 1934 : “In the beginning was a word I can’t spell, not a reversed Dog, or a physical light, but a word as long as Glastonbury and as short as pith ...[that] speaks out sharp & everlastingly like the intonations of death and doom on the magnificent syllables.”¹⁸

This experience, as I have tried to show, operates through the power of language to create, de-create and re-create a shifting world of words. The reader is involved directly, and in various ways. Specifically, the interplay between pre-text and anti-text engenders a space in which all lexical and semantic certainties are abolished. The text supplies a verbal field of force in which language, divested of its usual time-worn associations, opens up a space of ongoing creation of new semantic potentials. In this way words recover something of the freshness, innocence and vitality once perceived by Thomas as a child and in which Baudelaire discerned the essence of genius : “words burst upon me, unencumbered by trivial or portentous association ; words were their spring-like selves, fresh with Eden’s dew, as they flew out of the air. They made their own original associations as they sprang and shone...”¹⁹ By extension, these verbal pyrotechnics and the shifting polysemanticism place the reader prepared to follow Thomas at the very heart of the poetic act. The text less describes its own making than it gives the reader to experience the excitement and the ungraspability of the imaginative operation itself as it throws up an unceasing variety and richness of verbal

¹⁷ *Collected Letters*, To Pamela H. Johnson, 15th October 1933, *ibid.*, p.25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹⁹ « Poetic manifesto », *Texas Quarterly*, vol 4, N° 4, (Winter 1961), pp. 45-53.

combinations. It is this process which enables the reader, more than with any other poet of the modernist period, to become co-creator of the work in progress.

However, as Baudelaire also recognised, childlike sensitivity to the marvels of language does not suffice to produce a work of genius. Sensitivity, he claimed, must be deliberately contained by an “analytical mind which brings order to the materials involuntarily amassed.”²⁰ It is in this setting that the submerged meta-literary dimension assumes a major role for it provides an underpinning of imagery and “meaning”, an intellectual frame which, however repetitive and descriptive, lends Thomas’s writing imaginative coherence. The networking of auto-reflexive images functions, unbeknown most often to the reader, as an organising principle, a submerged but unifying paradigm. The text, in the end, plots a world, the world of the poem, laid down, arranged and structured. “Out of the inevitable conflict of images...”, wrote Thomas in a letter dated 1938, “I make that momentary peace that is a poem”²¹. The meta-literary grid of images provides the frame that allows that final coming-together of parts. The text is the island shape referred to in its own final sentence now disposed and enclosed within the “four map corners”. Far from being so much “poetic stuff...turned on like a tap” as Spender suggested, a Thomas text, as we have shown, is a complex, multi-layered, polysemic and highly-wrought construction. In brief, a “map” rather than a “tap”.

What value the reader draws from such an approach will depend on the one hand, as I have already suggested, upon the readers’ assumptions and expectations and, on the other, upon their degree of openness, agility of mind and imagination and the effort they are prepared to invest in deciphering and re-experiencing the creative process. I would add by way of conclusion that, personally, I find this text overcharged, and the surface structure of the narrative too slight and too fragmented, even in the context of Thomas’s practice of semantic destruction-creation, to carry the weight of underlying symbolism which tends to clog the very processes he intends to implement. Imperfect though it is, however, as an illustration of his technique of wrenching language into new forms and associations in order to both disconcert and dishabituate his readers while guiding them into spaces of the mind available only through language, it has a lot to teach us. As Thomas once put it: “All very unsatisfactory, I wrote it down hurriedly for you : not so much to elucidate things but to move them about, turn them in different ways, stir them up. The rest is up to you.”²²

²⁰ Baudelaire, Charles, « Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne », *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris, Pléiade, 1964) p. 1159.

²¹ Letter to Henry Treece, March 23rd, 1938, *Collected Letters*, *ibid.*, p. 282.

²² Letter to Desmond Hawkins, August 14th, 1939, *Collected Letters*, *ibid.*, p.398.