

*This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced PDF of an article accepted for publication in English following peer review. The version of record English, Vol.63, Issue 243 (Winter 2014): pp.296-312
D.O.I.: 10.1093/english/efu08 is available online at:
<http://english.oxfordjournals.org/content/63/243/296>*

'Under a shower of bird-notes': R. S. Thomas's elegiac poems for Elsi

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It has been customary to see elegies by male poets as exceptional rather than typical products of their authors. W. H. Auden wrote that 'Poets seem to be more generally successful at writing elegies than at any other literary genre'. Jahan Ramazani quotes Auden's statement in his study of modern elegy from Hardy to Heaney before going on to call Auden's own elegies 'among the best poems of the twentieth century' and 'famous laments'.¹ In the context of exceptional success, Peter Sacks reads Milton's 'Lycidas' as a combination of a career move to secure immortality and a deliberate exploitation of 'the pastoral elegy's potential for theological criticism or political satire'.² Similarly, Shelley himself called 'Adonais' 'the least imperfect of my compositions'.³ If we read these elegies from the Orphic perspective suggested by Melissa F. Zeiger then we have an interesting but essential elegiac paradox: the male elegy mourns a failure or loss of poetic power and masculine identity in its elegised subject only for enhanced power and identity to be enjoyed by the elegist in his writing out of that failure and loss.⁴ **This article discusses R. S. Thomas's elegies for his first wife Elsi and argues that it is not possible to separate them from the rest of his poetry or to discuss them in Orphic terms.**

The poetry of R. S. Thomas (1913-2000) contains a body of love poems to his wife his first wife Mildred (Elsi(e)) Eldridge, (1909-1991) which culminate in a number of elegiac poems published in *Mass for Hard Times* (1992), *No Truce with the Furies*

(1995) and the posthumous *Residues* (2002) assembled by Thomas's literary executor M. Wynn Thomas. Thomas's elegiac poems for Elsi challenge critical assumptions about the exceptionality and separability of elegy outlined above. I use the term 'elegiac poems' instead of 'elegies' deliberately because it is difficult to fit Thomas's poems into the body of consolatory writing that can be traced as, for example Peter Sacks has done, from Spenser to Yeats. For a start, Thomas's poems are simply too short to be measured easily, equitably or usefully against the expansiveness of Milton's 'Lycidas' or even against the large form of a later poem such as Auden's 'In Memoriam W. B. Yeats' which has little interest in traditional consolation. Indeed, Thomas's elegiac poems can often be best characterised by words like 'concise' or 'succinct'. Similarly, we will be disappointed if we try and track familiar elegiac tropes such as, for example, the use of repeated questions, the division of mourning between several voices, the catalogue of flowers or the elegist's reluctant submission to language and an accompanying protestation of incapacity. Crucially, there is no sense in Thomas's poems of the elegist's traditional ambivalence over whether his writing is an effective or ineffective protection of the dead.

A more obvious parallel might be expected with **Thomas Hardy's elegies of 1913-14 to his first wife 'Emma'**. Like Hardy, Thomas generally uses a short form and, in common with poems such as 'I Found Her Out There', uses a short line. There is, too, as we shall see, some similarity in Thomas's reworking and reframing of imagery across a number of poems but his remembrances of Elsi generally lack the self-accusing force of Hardy's.⁵ Indeed, I disagree with those who insist on reading the elegiac poems for Elsi as, in Rory Waterman's words, a mixture of 'apology and elegy'.⁶ There is a tendency in the writings of a number of Thomas's critics to read

the poems for Elsi, elegiac and otherwise, biographically – that is, as real accounts of a real marriage – and to neglect their status as literary artefacts. One wonders if this is partly because Thomas's late elegiac poems for Elsi, particularly the ones to be discussed here, are relatively plain, almost sparse. Biographical readings would seem to compensate the critic for Thomas's failure to provide either the elaborate imagery or the complex forms that we are accustomed to in elegy. The informality of Thomas's poems in terms of the sub-genre's conventions is, then, one interest of this article. My discussion will also focus briefly on Welsh aspects of the poems; and how, in contrast to the view shared by Shelley, Auden and Ramazani, Thomas's late poems for Elsi do not stand apart from his other poetry but are of a piece with it. To return to my earlier points about separation and separability, it will become apparent that many of Thomas's poems are interested in commemorating a shared subjectivity.

If a discussion of Thomas's elegiac poems for Elsi is complicated by their relative distance from the conventions of the sub-genre, then it is also complicated by difficulties with locating Thomas critically in the wider landscape of contemporary British and Irish poetry, i.e. poetry after 1970. It is worth noting that this was not always the case. When Penguin Modern Poets was launched in 1963, it was with a volume that placed Thomas alongside Lawrence Durrell and Elizabeth Jennings. Thomas poems were a staple of school anthologies of the 1960s and 1970s such as *Voices*. However, John Press's *A Map of Modern English Verse* (1969) discusses him in a chapter entitled 'The Movement and Poets of the 1950s' and makes the surprising observation that 'Although he clearly owes nothing to the Movement poets his work exhibits many of the virtues which they admired.'⁷ Thomas is not included in Keith Tuma's monumental *Anthology of Twentieth-Century British & Irish Poetry*

(2001). Neil Corcoran's *English Poetry since 1940* (1993) discusses Thomas in a section entitled 'From the Forties' and with Stevie Smith in a chapter entitled 'Two Solitudes'.⁸ The effect of this is not only to place Thomas in the past but also to make him seem backward-looking. Even Colin Meir's generally positive article on Thomas in Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt's *British Poetry since 1970: A Critical Survey* (1980) notes his 'basic limitations' and 'narrowness of range and style' before praising his unmatched 'clarity and gravity'.⁹ Thomas's long writing career has not turned him into a continuing presence.

Simply put, Thomas's subjects and modes were always at some distance from everybody else's (and from what has interested non-Welsh critics) in British and Irish postwar mainstream poetry. His focus was rural when much postwar poetry from, say, Philip Larkin to Simon Armitage has been predominantly urban. He was often lyric and Romantic when the predominant modes were increasingly dialogic and narrative. Similarly, his language became increasingly plain and direct in a period (after 1980 approximately) when the British and Irish mainstream became increasingly fictive, oblique and playful. Thomas's poetry stands apart from that mainstream's interest in hybridities and its distrust of definition and the definitive statement. Finally, his identity as a religious poet had no parallels in that mainstream and was, consequently, of little interest. Just how distant Thomas can seem from post-war British and Irish poetry is well-caught by David Wheatley's review of *Residues* (2002):

Thomas's fondness for generalising personification [...] contributes to the mood of prickly formality, and at its most unbending the sternness can be a problem. [...] His idea of satire, in a poem such as 'Dinner

Parties', is stiff and unconvincing. And it surely takes a very confident (or foolhardy) kind of writer, whose most personal experience of political discomfort has been non-Welsh-speaking English tourists, to lecture the citizens of Prague on [...] 'the nothing they were doing with their freedom'.

But to raise this objection at all is to place oneself outside the boundary fence of his unrelentingly sacral imagination, in which our worldly notions of freedom can hardly be expected to carry much weight.¹⁰

I have quoted Wheatley at length because his estimate exemplifies the difficulties in writing about Thomas. The sacral, the very thing which makes his poetry unique in a facetiously agnostic culture, is also what excludes the usual reader of contemporary poetry. It removes Thomas's poetry from the usual categories of criticism and, if we follow Wheatley, fatally hobbles it.

At the same time, one does not have to read very far into Thomas's oeuvre to be struck by an ambivalence about a range of subjects that keeps surfacing and resurfacing. It is surprising that this did not find more favour in a postmodern age. We had better come out and say that his Welshness has to be a factor. Where, for example, is the postwar Welsh poet writing in English about, say, class and region or origin and education who can be placed with, say, Harrison, Heaney and Dunn? John Davies would be an obvious candidate but remains largely unknown and unread outside Wales and his oeuvre is not extensive. Indeed, a large question for another essay is why Thomas's poetry did not 'pass' into the British mainstream in the same way. What Linden Peach has identified as his double, ambivalent

acknowledgement of ‘the importance of the traditional view of myth in Welsh culture’ and ‘myth as problematic’ would seem to converge with Heaney’s and Dunn’s contestations of constructions of Irishness and Scottishness.¹¹ Indeed, Michael Parker notes Thomas’s influence on Heaney’s formative period of 1962-63.¹² At the same time, Thomas’s profile has clearly suffered from what Sam Adams has termed ‘the unaccountable resistance of London-based newspapers and journals to anything published in Wales’.¹³ Similarly, Sheenagh Pugh, surveying Welsh writing in English at the beginning of the current century, noted that ‘In the recent spate of anthologies to celebrate the millennium, Wales was desperately under-represented.’¹⁴ Is it simply that Thomas lacked the backing of a Faber and Faber to market his critiques of internal colonialism and of belittling and infantilising cultural constructions adeptly and astutely to English readers as a ‘must have’ poetic product? Such questions remain moot. And, in this context, Sarah Broom’s passing reference to ‘a tradition’ that includes ‘R. S. Thomas, Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley’ gestures at something that seems improbable if not unimaginable for English metropolitan critics.¹⁵

In *The New Poetry in Wales* (2007), Ian Gregson draws on Deleuze and Guattari to argue that R. S. Thomas and Gillian Clarke ‘share the ideology of majoritarian thinkers who assume that a language and a homeland should be in natural and universal relationship with each other—their anger arises because that relationship is conspicuously denied to the Welsh.’ If this is correct, then unlike Dunn and Heaney, Thomas’s poetry, for Gregson, does not see “minor” status as a creative opportunity, so that it deconstructs any assumptions about naturalness and universality, and lays national identity open to multiple questioning’.¹⁶ In terms of reception, this begs the question whether, in the context of Heaney’s famous comment that he was going ‘to

take the English lyric and make it eat stuff that it has never been eaten before', 'minor' status has been easier to market and, in fact, easier to consume.¹⁷ The multiple questioning of assumptions about naturalness, universality and national identity that it enables in the poetry of, say, Dunn and Heaney was in tune with the moment of postmodernity without departing audibly and visibly from mainstream poetic traditions.

The difficulty of placing Thomas in a larger narrative of contemporary British and Irish poetry may seem remote from elegiac writing but it may go some way to explaining why the poems for Elsi have received little attention from non-Welsh critics. I want to begin my discussion of Thomas's elegiac poems for Elsi with 'A Marriage' from *Mass for Hard Times* (1992):

We met

under a shower

of bird notes.

Fifty years passed,

love's moment

in a world in

servitude to time.

She was young;

I kissed with my eyes

closed and opened

them on her wrinkles.

'Come' said death,

choosing her as his

partner for
 the last dance. And she,
 who in life
 had done everything
 with a bird's grace,
 opened her bill now
 for the shedding
 of one sigh no
 heavier than a feather.¹⁸

The ending of the poem, its closing sigh, looks forward to the posthumously published 'Golden Wedding' in which the marriage is 'fifty long years / of held breath' during which 'the heart has become warm' and which makes clear that both parties in the marriage held their breath.¹⁹ There is also, perhaps, a distant echo in the opening image of 'A Marriage' of the birds of Rhiannon singing at the wedding of Culhwch and Olwen. Tony Brown notes the recurrence in the late elegiac poems of 'images of lightness and softness, the awareness of scrupulous sensitivity with which she has partnered him through life'.²⁰ How to catch that in poetry is partly the point of the poem's careful phrasing and syntax and its preponderance of 'i' and 'o' sounds. 'One sigh' is a sharp contrast to the opening 'shower / of bird-notes' even as it echoes it sonically. The poem's movement between three, four and five syllable lines and its stepped form would seem to mime both the inward and outward movement of the breath and the difficult movement of last breaths; and the last line's stumbling self-echo (heavier/feather) seems entirely appropriate in this context too. The stepped form also aids our sensation of a past-present temporal movement. This is

reminiscent of the sudden temporal shifts in some of Hardy's so-called 'Emma' poems. And there is perhaps a distant reminiscence of the 'delicate head' in Hardy's 'Rain on a Grave' in Thomas's 'bird's grace'.²¹

Many of the Elsi poems share the relatively narrow, skinny form of 'A Marriage'. This is in marked contrast to the formal conventions of elegy which tends to pose the expansiveness of its own form and its intricate internal patterning against the stark fact of loss and the cut thread of life. Thomas's forms are stark and skeletal and do not promise comfort. In a detailed account of the influence of Edward Thomas on R. S. Thomas's poetry, Sam Perry sees striking similarities between the austere diction and relatively compressed forms that both poets used in autobiographical poems.²² It is tempting to see this similarity continuing into the elegiac poems for Elsi. Thomas's skeletal forms also seem to echo in a curious way the many references to bone in his later poetry. One might note here the assertion in the autumn section of 'The Seasons' from *Mass for Hard Times* (1992) that 'To creep in for shelter / under the bone's tree / is to be charred by time's / lightning stroke.'²³ This might signal to us that the Elsi poems are, if not explicitly inconsolable, at least exposed to the ever-present possibility. Other meanings suggest themselves. 'Comparisons' from the posthumous *Residues* (2002) concludes 'I have let / her ashes down / in me like an anchor.'²⁴ If this suggests depths, then it also suggests soundings and, indeed, one is reminded of Blake Morrison's description of Seamus Heaney's "arterial imagination' in *Wintering Out* and *North* which means 'poems are to be seen as drills, wells, augers, capillaries, mine-shafts, bore-holes, plumb-lines'. Poems become exploratory and reject rhyming quatrains and pentameters as 'a superficial rationalist mode'.²⁵ However, as one of Eliot's epigraphs to 'The Waste Land' reminds us, the way up and the way down are the same and, in the overall context of

Thomas's late poetry, it is tempting to read his vertical forms moving just as often in the opposite direction. 'Circles' from *Mass for Hard Times* (1992) ends with the image of 'the poet / who, from the rope-trick / of the language, called down'.²⁶ The poet is likened to an angel stranded between heaven and earth. Without wishing to make too much of this one might wonder whether Thomas's narrow, vertical forms are particularly appropriate for writing that is constantly in search of new co-ordinates on an axis between life in the world and what comes after.

The most striking thing about 'A Marriage', though, is the bird imagery used to describe the elegised subject. To liken someone to a bird is to evoke lightness and smallness but perhaps also a quick flitting from one thing to another. It might also evoke a small, song-like voice. There are many poetic birds that might be evoked for the well-read reader of poetry. The most appropriate here might be Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'The Caged Skylark' where the eponymous bird figures 'man's mounting spirit' which, though 'flesh-bound' can 'sing sometimes the sweetest, sweetest spells' when 'uncumberèd'.²⁷ In this poem, the bird figures what might be termed a double embodiment of flesh and spirit. Like Hopkins's poem, Thomas's poem recalls lyric poetry's special engagement with birds and birdsong: for example, Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale', Thomas Hardy's 'The Darkling Thrush' and the unlovely sedge-warbler, crow and corncrake in Seamus Heaney's 'Serenades'.²⁸ Drew Milne argues that such poems, particularly Keats's, 'are pitched at the limits of a known estrangement from the ecstasies evoked.' He goes on to argue that 'an unreconciled affinity between birds and humans' in perceptions of spirit in natural beauty 'allows the lyric poet to explore both the limits of humanism in our conceptions of song and the limits to disenchantment in the human domination of nature.'²⁹ There is something of this in Thomas's poem 'Bird Watching' which asks a 'Winged God' to approve the belief

'in the ability of the heart / to migrate, if only momentarily, / between the quotidian and the sublime.'³⁰ Ideas of estrangement and limit would seem to be particularly pertinent to elegiac writing which has to find a way of singing about the stopped ecstasies of another's body. A more pessimistic 'bird' note is struck in 'Incubation' where evil is 'the plumage we acquire / by natural selection'.³¹

'Plumage' appears in a very different context in 'The Trees' from *The Stones of the Field* (1946) where spring trees have branches like wings 'Dressed with green plumage'.³² If Thomas's poetry is highly allusive to itself, it is also highly allusive to Welsh literature. Jason Walford Davies has made a detailed study of these allusions and this part of my discussion is greatly indebted to him.³³ 'The Trees' echoes a similar image in Dafydd ap Gwilym. Birds are a particularly notable aspect of Welsh literature and mythology. For example, the birds of Rhiannon are supernatural creatures who wake the dead, lull the living to sleep and heal the sick and the wounded. Their song is the sweetest thing that any mortal will ever hear. In the story of Culhwch ac Olwen, Culhwch is set forty impossible tasks by Ysbaddeden Pencawr in the wooing of his daughter Olwen. The thirteenth task is the gaining of the birds so they can sing at the wedding feast. One is reminded of 'Nuptials' from *Mass for Hard Times* (1992) in which 'Like a bird he sang, / when they were married, / on a branch of his own prospects.'³⁴ And there is an echo of 'I saw her / [...] and spread the panoply of my feathers' in the title poem of *The Way of It* (1977).³⁵

The title poem of *The Way of It* also describes Elsi as 'foraging / like a bird for something / for us to eat.'³⁶ The same story of Culhwch contains the blackbird of Cilgwri, one of the oldest creatures in the world. Davies argues that 'A Blackbird Singing' from *Poetry for Supper* (1958), in which the bird is 'A slow singer, but loading each phrase / with history's overtones', evokes the legendary bird.³⁷ This

converges with the way that Thomas's poetry turns the personal/lyrical and cultural/historical into overtones of each other. Birds, then, are not only an audible and visible aspect of the natural but also modern day descendants of active agents in mythological tales. Fflur Dafydd argues that Thomas's 'bird imagery also functions on a more political level'.³⁸ Birds, she argues, appear variously in Thomas's poetry as images of consolation to be placed 'against Anglicization and the machine'; as '[symbols] of regeneration and repair' in the same context; and as symbols of 'rejuvenation and cultural promise'.³⁹ What we might call the 'bird-like-ness' of Elsi seems to function in similar ways, evoking the possibility of redress for the brutalities of the present. And, to return to Drew Milne, bird imagery is also a way of evoking and writing oneself into the history of lyric poetry.

As we shall see, bird imagery can be found throughout Thomas's late elegiac poems but it is also present in other later poems too. 'Vocabulary' from *Residues* (2002) seems very reminiscent of Hopkins's 'The Caged Skylark'. Where Hopkins's poem puts man's spirit in 'his bone-house', Thomas's subject is in a 'cage of time' on 'the bone's perch'; then 'a bird / with new feathers' and finally comes home with 'the metallic / gleam of a new poem in your bill'.⁴⁰ There are two noteworthy convergences with Dylan Thomas. He also used birds to symbolise the human spirit. 'Ears in the Turrets Hear' figures the body as an island ('thin sea of flesh' and 'bone coast') unvisited by birds. And one wonders whether R. S. Thomas had in mind 'Especially when the October wind' and its line 'By the sea's side hear the dark-vowelled birds' when writing 'Vocabulary'.⁴¹

To return to the late elegiac poems, 'Still' also equates death or departing life with birds. Here, the opening of the poem makes a blunt move from 'You waited with impatience / each year for the autumn migration' to 'Your turn then.'⁴² The poem

ends with the poet at his wife's grave 'where your small bones had their nest'. Suddenly, an owl flies up and 'I wondered'. This is reminiscent of another fine contemporary elegy, John Ash's 'Elegy, Replica, Echo: in memoriam John Griggs 1941-1991' where 'a peacock cried out / in the garden, and I shivered'. The poet sees the bird quite clearly but moments later it had gone 'and the gardener knew nothing of it.'⁴³ The birds in both poems are at once moments of supernatural transcendence and images of brief presence (life span) and sudden departure (death). One is again reminded of Thomas Hardy who, while he does not use birds, does emphasise what 'The Going' calls 'swift fleeing' and what 'Without Ceremony' terms a vanishing and a disappearance in 'that swift style'.⁴⁴ This, in turn, finds an echo in Thomas's 'Together' which remembers 'the swiftness of [death's] arrival'.⁴⁵ One might also recall the scene in the film *Blade Runner* when, at the moment of his death, the surviving replicant, Roy Batty, releases a white dove from his hand.

Tony Brown argues that the recurrence of birds in Thomas's late elegiac poems

recalls his wife's love of the birds which she had painted throughout her life and, especially at Sarn, had watched intently and recorded in her diary; birds are a motif which haunt several of these poems, also evoking the stature and, in her late years, the fragility of Elsi herself'.⁴⁶

Brown reads a pun in the title of 'Still', a play on the annual movement of birds and the subject's lack of movement. Where Elsi has 'departed', there are no warmer climes only 'the dark' which has 'no poles' and or 'horizon'. At the same time, the close of the poem suggests that 'still' can be read in its everyday sense of 'perhaps' or 'maybe'. The compressed form of the poem and the image of the departing bird

might also suggest, in the context of Milne's argument, the poet's anxiety over a departing lyric facility/gift. We should not, of course, neglect possible connections between birds in Thomas's poems and birds in The Bible. Biblical birds are numerous but the line about sparrows in Matthew X: 29-31 seems particularly relevant to the elegiac poems for Elsi: 'Not one of them shall fall to the ground without your Father.'

Again, as with 'A Marriage' and 'Vocabulary', 'Still' echoes another non-elegiac poem, 'Migrants' from the earlier *Mass for Hard Times* (1992). The poem opens with 'He is that great void' and proceeds to sketch a Wordsworthian narrative of journey and return. God's dwelling is 'his bleak north' where we are bound to return but even at 'the Pole' there are moments 'when he, too, pauses in his withdrawal, / so that it is light there all night long.'⁴⁷ There is something of the ambivalence here that other critics have identified. 'Still' is a poem that seems bleak and faithless and relies on the supernatural to permit its final 'I wondered' which is both puzzlement and awe. 'Migrants', on the other hand, is clearly a poem of faith in its oppositions of darkness and light and its evocation of a merciful, albeit unpredictable, God. Earlier in the same book, in 'Swallows', the poet calls himself a being of 'endless' migrations and 'a migrant / between nominatives'.⁴⁸ With its phrase 'though my perch / be of bone', the poem also looks forward to the much later 'Vocabulary' which refers to 'the bone's perch'. Finally, the migration image appears in 'Bird Watching' from *No Truce with the Furies* (1995) which asks for God's approval to go on believing in 'the ability of the heart / to migrate, if only momentarily, / between the quotidian and the sublime.'⁴⁹ Such an ability might also be a description of lyric poetry.

What might be called another supernatural bird moment can be found in 'No Time'.⁵⁰ The poem begins simply and bleakly: 'She left me. What voice / colder than

the wind / out of the grave said: / 'It is over?'

Brown is right to see some similarity with or echo of Thomas Hardy's so-called 'Emma' poems here. Voice, grave, and cold wind are common to both. (It is also worth noting that 'Dreaming', a poem about 'the uselessness of remembering' ends with 'the voice calling' which reworks the ending of Hardy's 'The Voice'.⁵¹) Then there is 'a tremor / of light' like the sudden movement of a bird and the poet experiences 'recognition / of a presence in absence'. The presence departs, leaving 'a scent lingering' which is then likened to time destroying 'itself in love's fire'. It is hard not to catch a distant echo of the epigraph from Virgil that Hardy uses for the so-called 'Emma' poems: 'veteris vestigia flammae'. 'Flammae' can mean either 'flames' or 'ashes'. The echoes of Hardy raise a question similar to that posed by Donald Davie about Hardy's use of Virgil: what kind of space is opened by Thomas's elegiac poems for Elsi? Davie asked whether Hardy's epigraph opened a metaphysical or a psychological space and, as Tim Armstrong points out, this question was closely bound up with Davie's ideas about how and why elegy might be valuable.⁵² For Davie, a poem that can be laid, like a literary transparency, over the psychological work of mourning has limited cultural force. While it is clear Thomas's poems resist assimilation into a Sacks-like interpretation, it is also unclear how they might be called metaphysical.

'No Time', by dint of its very title, opens questions of representation and suggests that Thomas is interested in exploring non-times and non-places. There is something of the uncanny here and, as David Kennedy (2007) has noted, this has become an increasingly prominent feature of late twentieth and early twenty-first century elegies. Such elegies, Kennedy argues, 'seek ways of keeping their subject's singularity in the world. They seek ways to continue to be unsettled by it.'⁵³ The effect of such poems converges with what Gillian Beer identifies in ghost stories: 'Ghost stories are

to do with the insurrection, not the resurrection of the dead.’⁵⁴ An elegy that embraces the uncanny means not only that it remains unsettled but also that it does not refuse consolation so much as try to avoid doing anything that might set the work of mourning in motion. Kennedy looks at Sean O’Brien’s elegy for Barry MacSweeney and at a number of elegies for the Australian poet John Forbes. ‘No Time’ shares something else with those poems: the way that the returning dead subject activates the subjectivity of the poet. The poem records not only Elsi’s fleeting ghostly presence but also the poet’s momentary activation by her presence. This is something that happens in other ‘Elsi’ poems like, for example, ‘Still’ which we discussed earlier.

What seems to be represented by the ‘Elsi’ poems is, then, their own momentary sparking and fading as records of presence. This is certainly the case with ‘The Morrow’ which comprises two nine-line stanzas.⁵⁵ We have already noted that Thomas’s poems generally reject elegiac conventions but here the poem poses a number of questions albeit different in manner to the usual elegiac ones. The first stanza places the poet walking at night on the evening of the day after his wife’s death. He looks up at the stars and asks ‘Is she up there...?’ The second stanza places the poet ‘alone in my room’. As in ‘No Time’, he is reading and finds the wife’s presence ‘speechlessly’ asking if all is well. In the book he is reading, he finds an answer to ‘the world’s question’ about where the soul goes at death. The answer is that the soul does not need to go anywhere. Presence and where the dead go are also the subject of ‘In Memoriam: M. E. E.’ from the posthumously published *Residues*.⁵⁶ Here, the remembered ‘she’ is ‘here, gone’ like the rainbow to be seen when a fly moves its wings. ‘Here, gone’ evokes Freud’s famous account of his grandson’s ‘fort/da’ game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922). It is by now a

commonplace that Freud's reading of the game was simplistic. Critics such as Peter Middleton (1992) and William Watkin (2004) have explained it in terms of masculine subjectivity and as a game of proximity vs. metonymy.⁵⁷ For Watkin, 'proximity' is best understood by the title of Frank O'Hara's poem 'A Step Away From Them'. The poet's dead friends – Bunny Lang, John Latouche and Jackson Pollock – 'are close, just a step away, but what a step he seems to be suggesting, a distance wide enough to remove their presence from our world permanently.' Proximity: the closeness of distance—and the inverse is obvious. Proximity becomes, then, 'not a measurable or geometric distance' but a kind of restlessness brought about by the presence of death and loss and one's responsibilities in the face of them. The fort/da game is metonymic because the game stands in for the relationship of its two poles as well as for the greater loss, i.e. the mother's absence.⁵⁸

Louise O. Fradenburg argues that '*fort* and *da* are not so much alternating oppositions but particularities linked by this thread' and that, in playing the game, Freud's grandson 'may be creating something new – a gestural meaning, something like 'there is a thread between this and that'.⁵⁹ Or, we might add, a thread between possession and dispossession, desire and loss. Crucially, we might argue, following Fradenburg, that the boy creates a thread, a connection or relationship between his self and another person he knows of but cannot see. This means, on the one hand, that the game teaches him that subjectivity is formed in and sustained in relationships with others and, on the other, that there is a direct relation between his particularity and someone else's. Subjectivity is formed in and through loss and on a thread between authenticity and fictionality. The game allows the boy to imagine himself as the person who can cope with mother's absence. And, in terms of elegiac

writing, the game is an aesthetic strategy that produces a cultural object through play functioning as a kind of adaptive therapy.

We could make a similar point about the writing of a poem such as 'In Memoriam: M. E. E.' It asks the same question as 'The Morrow'—where has she gone?—and goes on to wonder if there is, in fact, any difference between nowhere and anywhere. The poem enjambes the first word so that it becomes 'no-/where', literally a 'no where' just as an earlier poem took place in a 'no time'. Visiting the grave becomes a kind of 'fort/da' game of its own: the poem wonders whether immortality is merely a matter of saying a name over and over again but resolves to 'let / the inscription do it / for me.' The saying of a name is, of course, a matter of presence and absence, a 'here gone', founded in the breath. The brief articulation is like the final 'shedding of one sigh' in 'A Marriage' and may also figure the relative brevity of Elsi's existence on earth. The poem ends by imagining that others will come to the grave in future where the 'brush strokes' of the 'timeless' lichen will evoke Elsi working in her studio forever. This recalls 'Plas-yn-Rhiw' from *Mass for Hard Times* (1992) where lichen is like writing that is 'too slow / for the mind to attend to.'⁶⁰

The lichen's timelessness or slowness is in marked contrast to the sudden shrinking or passing of time that characterises other poems for Elsi. Crucially, it is marked opposition to the suddenness of her death. Visitors to the grave will take part in a species of 'fort/da' game. 'In Memoriam: M. E. E.' uses tropes of representation (engraved stone, painting, brush) to present and complicate its presentation of presence in absence. The presence that activates the poet and his poem will also activate other minds in future. His continuing attachment is a first step towards something similar to what Tammy Clewell finds in postmodern fiction that deals with mourning: 'a politics and ethics of mourning' that derives from 'the obligation [...] to

sustain bereaved memory for the work of establishing new constellations for identity and culture.⁶¹ In marked contrast to the anti-elegiac sentiments in modern elegy that assert continuing grief against wider cultural and social denials of death, the poem imagines a future whether Elsi's memory will be an activating presence.

'Together' is one of the longer 'Elsi' poems and mingles different orders of representation as well as presenting Elsi as someone across which and through which binaries are in play.⁶² Just as commemoration in 'In Memoriam: M. E. E.' is a combination of writing, art and natural processes, so Elsi herself is associated with nature and with art. She is like the 'shore' that the poet walks but is also mistress of 'art's storehouse'. She is likened to the natural world outside the marital home but she is also keeper of the garden. She is the 'messenger' of life because she gives birth to their son but she is also the person who has died and who, at the moment of death, can tell us nothing about where she is going. The poem ends with Elsi on her deathbed at the moment of her passing, her upper lip 'reticent as the bud that is / the precursor of the flower'. The cumulative effect of the poem has been to suggest that the meaning of Elsi and her existence was located across and between the various aspects of her life and all the things that the poem likens her to. The effect of the ending is to look forward into the future with an understated allusion to spring and summer. Death, like winter in relation to the other seasons, is only one stage in a longer cycle of life, death and rebirth. Death, indeed, seems to be figured as the ultimate flowering of the departing soul or spirit.

The next 'Elsi' poem is 'Matrimony' which attempts an over-view of the marriage.⁶³ The narrating 'I' recounts how the marriage had 'shaky foundations' because he spoke what was truly in his heart while 'she' pretended. Nonetheless, they managed to build together 'one of love's shining / greenhouses to let fly / in with our looks.'

Love as a greenhouse is a complex image which evokes both fragility, artificiality (forced plants) and protection from extremities. A greenhouse is also a place where seedlings are nurtured in order to be planted out later. 'Let fly' perhaps echoes distantly the proverbial phrases about glasshouses and casting the first stone. But there may also be an echo of Edward Thomas's influence. Sam Perry argues that the work of both poets recounts the 'difficulty' of 'attempting to reach out beyond the confines of the self' and quotes Edward Thomas's 'I Built Myself a House of Glass'.⁶⁴ One wonders if this poem was at the back of R. S. Thomas's mind when he was writing 'Matrimony'.

The cycle of elegiac poems for Elsi can be said to end with 'Comparisons' which Thomas's executor M. Wynn Thomas chose to publish in *Residues*.⁶⁵ I have already noted how the poem closes on an image of depth and anchoring. The poem begins 'To all light things / I compared her' and we are, once again, in the world of bird comparisons. Elsi is compared to a snowflake, a feather and a bird on its nest. We might recall the ending of 'A Marriage' where Elsi's last breath was as light as a feather. Snow and feathers then become images of how quickly things pass or 'are blown away'. So the poem ends on a nicely turned paradox: that even in death, Elsi's lightness (her ashes) are what keep Thomas grounded. And, of course, in the context of an elegiac poem, lightness might also function as an implied contrast with the weight of a coffin containing a body and the weight of the earth on the coffin after burial. But the image of 'her [...] in me' also makes the ashes an image of Elsi's permanent lodgement in Thomas's interior world. There is, perhaps, an echo of Hardy here not only in the absent wife as an internalised presence but in the distant allusion to Hardy's epigraph from Virgil 'veteris vestigia flammae'. The poem reminds

us that, as with Hardy's poems for Emma, Thomas's elegiac poems for Elsi are as much about a marriage as they are about a loss.

But the echo of Hardy also underlines how distinct Thomas's poems are from the work of the older poet. 'Traces of an old flame' also allows us to read Hardy's poems of 'Poems of 1912-13', in Jane Thomas's words, 'as artworks which test the expressive capacity of language.'⁶⁶ The direct simplicity of R. S. Thomas's poems for Elsi signals a confidence in language's capacity that is lacking in Hardy. Crucially, the feather imagery underlines that while Thomas's elegiac poems cannot be separated from his larger oeuvre, his elegiac poems do stand apart from much male elegiac writing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Indeed, Thomas's elegiac poems seem to have more in common not only with the shared interiority between poet and subject that we find in much elegiac writing by women but with Derrida's argument that the dead go on living 'in us'.⁶⁷ I referred earlier to the possibility that Thomas's elegiac poems for Elsi converge with an ethics of mourning. I want to conclude by suggesting that, if they do so, then their convergence has little to do with the self-interested portrayal of failed agency or the desire for an unobtainable reciprocity that, for example, R. Clifton Spargo has identified in literary mourning.⁶⁸

The bird-like 'presence in absence' in 'No Time' and the owl flying from the grave in 'Still' underline, even in their portrayals of absence, the extent to which Thomas's elegiac poems for Elsi assert and celebrate her unique presence but not as something radically other or radically inaccessible before which the poet must struggle for words. Without wishing to make a crass analogy, it is not unreasonable to suggest that a poet whose work attempts, in part, to answer the question of God's presence in the world and for the self might be well-prepared for elegiac writing. The

continuities between Thomas's elegiac poems for Elsi and his larger oeuvre suggest a responsible commitment to a particular way of behaving in language and to a particular poetic practice. To put this another way, perhaps the only useful comparison with Thomas Hardy is that the type of marriage lamented by Hardy is precisely the one that R. S. Thomas wished to celebrate. Agency and reciprocity are what we choose to make of them for ourselves and others.

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¹ Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (London and Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), p.176.

² Sacks, Peter, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), pp.90-1.

³ Smith, Eric, *By Mourning Tongues: Studies in English Elegy*, (Ipswich and Totowa: Boydell Press / Roman and Littlefield, 1977), p.58.

⁴ Zeiger, Melissa F., *Beyond Consolation: Death Sexuality, and the Changing Shapes of Elegy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp.10-11.

⁵ It is interesting to note that the recent *Poems to Elsi* (Bridgend: Seren, 2013) has a foreword by Rowan Williams which notes that the volume's editor Damian Walford Davies says that Thomas 'was not another Thomas Hardy' (7). However, Davies' introduction states that 'Thomas's elegies clearly share in processes of self-recrimination that mark Hardy's elegies.' (14)

⁶ Rory Waterman, 'Becoming Warm: Matrimony and Reticence in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas', *Bristol Journal of English Studies*, Issue 1 (Summer 2012), 1-7:7.

⁷ John Press *A Map of Modern English Verse* (Oxford: OUP, 1969), p.255.

⁸ Neil Corcoran's *English Poetry since 1940* (Harlow: Longman, 1993), pp.70-8.

⁹ Colin Meirs, 'The Poetry of R.S.Thomas', in Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt, eds, *British Poetry since 1970: A Critical Survey* (Manchester, Carcanet, 1980), pp.1-13: p.12, p.13.

¹⁰ David Wheatley, 'Keep on keeping on'

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/mar/08/featuresreviews.guardian18>.

Accessed 18.5.12.

¹¹ Linden Peach, *Ancestral Lines: Culture and Identity in the Work of Six Contemporary Poets* (Bridgend: Seren, 1993), p.20.

¹² Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), pp.42-3.

¹³ Adams, Sam, 'Letter from Wales', *PN Review* 149 (January-February 2003), 7-8: 7.

¹⁴ Pugh, Sheenagh, 'Welsh Writing in English: the Current Scene', *Fulcrum* (Number One, 2002), 129-131: 131.

¹⁵ Sarah Broom, *Contemporary British and Irish Poetry: An Introduction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p.123

¹⁶ Ian Gregson, *The New Poetry in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2007), p.3.

¹⁷ In Parker, *Seamus Heaney* (1993), p.123.

¹⁸ R. S. Thomas, *Collected Later Poems 1988-2000* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2004), p.198. Hereafter, *CLP*.

¹⁹ *CLP*, 328.

²⁰ Tony Brown, "Love's Depths': R. S. Thomas's Poems to his Wife', *Renascence* 60.2 (Winter 2008), 131-159: 156.

²¹ Thomas Hardy, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p.54 .

²² Perry, Sam, "In search of something chance would never bring': The Poetry of R. S. Thomas and Edward Thomas', *The Review of English Studies*, Vol.59, No.241 (2008), 582-603: 602-3

²³ *CLP*, p.191.

²⁴ *CLP*, p.345

²⁵ Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Methuen, 1982), p.45.

²⁶ *CLP*, p.173.

²⁷ Hopkins, Gerard Manley, *Poems and Prose* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), pp.31-2.

²⁸ Seamus Heaney, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p.85.

²⁹ Milne, Drew, 'In Memory of the Pterodactyl: the limits of lyric humanism', *The Paper*, Issue 2 (September 2001), pp.16-29: 20, 23.

³⁰ *CLP*, p.265.

³¹ *CLP*, p.259.

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- ³² R. S. Thomas, *The Stones of the Field* (Camarthen: The Druid Press Limited, 1946), p.33.
- ³³ See Jason Walford Davies, "Thick Ambush of Shadows': Allusions to Welsh Literature in the Work of R. S. Thomas, *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays*, Volume 1 (1995): 75-127.
- ³⁴ *CLP*, p.153.
- ³⁵ In R. S. Thomas, *Later Poems: A Selection* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p.91.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.91.
- ³⁷ R. S. Thomas, *Poetry for Supper* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1958), p.33.
- ³⁸ Fflur Dafydd, "There were fathoms in her too': R. S. Thomas and Women', *Renascence* 60.2 (Winter 2008), 117-130: 122.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.122-3.
- ⁴⁰ *CLP*, p.349.
- ⁴¹ Thomas, Dylan, *Collected Poems 1934-1952* (London: Dent, 1952), pp.58-9, pp.16-17.
- ⁴² *CLP*, p.231.
- ⁴³ John Ash, *Two Books: The Anatolikon and To the City* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), p.24.
- ⁴⁴ Thomas Hardy, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p.50, p.58.
- ⁴⁵ *CLP*, pp.315-6.
- ⁴⁶ Brown, *op.cit.*, p.152.
- ⁴⁷ *CLP*, p.204.
- ⁴⁸ *CLP*, p.253.
- ⁴⁹ *CLP*, p.265.
- ⁵⁰ *CLP*, p.237.
- ⁵¹ *CLP*, p.300.
- ⁵² See, respectively, Davie, Donald, 'Hardy's Virgilian Purples', *Agenda* 10: 2-3: 138-156. Reprinted in *With the Grain: Essays on Thomas Hardy and Modern British Poetry* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999); and Tim Armstrong 'Hardy's "Poems of 1912-13" in Neil Roberts, ed, *A Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp.359-368.
- ⁵³ David Kennedy, *Elegy* (London: Routledge, 2007), p.144.
- ⁵⁴ In Jackson, Rosemary (1995) *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, London & New York: Routledge, p.69.
- ⁵⁵ *CLP*, p.281.

⁵⁶ CLP, p.313.

⁵⁷ Middleton, Peter, *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity & Subjectivity in Modern Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p.91; and Watkin, William, *On Mourning: Theories of Loss in Modern Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), pp.164-5 and pp.194-5.

⁵⁸ Watkin, op.cit., pp.62-3 and pp.223-4.

⁵⁹ Fradenburg, Louise O. (1990) "'Voice Memorial": Loss and Reparation in Chaucer's Poetry', *Exemplaria*, Vol.2: 169–202: 183.

⁶⁰ CLP, p.154.

⁶¹ Tammy Clewell, *Mourning, Modernism, Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.4.

⁶² CLP, pp.315-6.

⁶³ CLP, p.318.

⁶⁴ Perry, op.cit., p.598.

⁶⁵ CLP, p.345.

⁶⁶ Jane Thomas, *Thomas Hardy and Desire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p.174.

⁶⁷ Jacques Derrida (2003) *The Work of Mourning*, (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p.159.

⁶⁸ R. Clifton Spargo, *The Ethics of Mourning: Grief and Responsibility in Literature* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004). See, in particular, Spargo's discussion of ethics (14-38) and of Hardy's 'Poems of 1912-13 (165-208).