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## Homing : poetry ; &, An essay on the poetic leap in the late work of R.S. Thomas

Shevaun Cooley  
*Edith Cowan University*

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# Edith Cowan University

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# **Homing**

**Poetry**

**&**

**An Essay on the Poetic Leap in the Late Work of R.S. Thomas**

**Shevaun Cooley, B.A. (Hons.)**

**Faculty of Education and Arts**

**Edith Cowan University**

**2<sup>nd</sup> September, 2013**

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## Abstract

*Homing*, as a collection, speaks to the capacity and yearning to navigate our way towards something we might call home. In animal behaviour, this seems like an instinct, hard-wired to the body. It is something I envy. By comparison, the instinct, in human behaviour, feels muffled and complicated.

These poems move between two places in which I feel 'at home', whatever that means: the south-west of Western Australia, where I was born and raised, and the north-west of Wales, where I lived for a time, and find myself returning to, drawn not by blood, but by longing, and a deep affinity for the landscape. Without any real intention, in the writing of the poems I found I had a lot to say about rivers. In particular, I found myself repeating images of drifting and gripping, as if these two, opposing, compulsions also said something about how we try to find our way home. The poet Mark Doty speaks of a "fierce internal debate between staying moored and drifting away, between holding and letting go."<sup>1</sup> It is as if the river, too, knows something of how to arrive, and yet its movement is much like that of these poems, pulled by new hungers, at times distracted, or slowed, or apparently lost. Drift. Grip. Perhaps it is, after all, another kind of instinct.

In the critical essay that accompanies the poems, I look at the poetic leap in the work of the Welsh poet and priest, R.S. Thomas. I was initially compelled by a strange parallel between an actual physical leap of escape, enacted by Thomas, who leapt a graveyard wall in order to avoid speaking to the mourners to whom he had just ministered a funeral service, and the leap found in Italo Calvino's essay on lightness. This leap is also one of escape, in which the poet-philosopher Guido Cavalcanti places a hand on a grave and leaps lightly over it, in order to elude the taunts of some local louts. Calvino calls this act, "an auspicious image for the new millennium."<sup>2</sup>

In poetry we find the leap in the act of making metaphor, in enjambment, even in a kind of concentration. In Thomas's work, the leap is focused in the form of the raptor; a presence repeated throughout his oeuvre, carrying with it many of his chief concerns, about God, love, and the inherent ferocity of the natural world. In a close

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<sup>1</sup> Doty, M. (2001). *Still life with oysters and lemon*. Boston: Beacon Press, p.7

<sup>2</sup> Calvino, I. (2009). *Six memos for the next millennium*. (P. Creagh, Trans.) London: Penguin Classics, p.12

reading of those poems, and with the aid of thinkers as disparate as Helene Cixous, Roland Barthes, Simone Weil and Edward Said, this essay is an attempt to trace the ways the leap works in Thomas's poetry. It is also an attempt to analyse and understand the way poetry itself works to *move* the reader, in all senses of the word.

## Acknowledgements

This work would not have been possible without the thoughtful, perceptive and meticulous reading and advice of my supervisor, Dr Marcella Polain. For everything, thank you.

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My thanks to Dr Jason Walford Davies for his gracious assistance in accessing the R.S. Thomas Archives at the University of Bangor, Wales; to Richard Baxter for the generous offer of use of his cottage, Glan-y-don, in Parc Cenedlaethol Eryri (Snowdonia National Park), and to the Newall-Watson family for their friendship and hospitality in Edinburgh.

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There is no real way to properly thank my family and friends for the countless ways they have supported, surprised, rallied and amused me. The best parts of this book are a tribute to them.

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# **Answerably Peregrine**

**The poetic leap in the late work of R.S. Thomas**

**It is the capacity of the arts ... to make us, if not at home, at least alertly, answerably peregrine in the unhousedness of our human circumstance.**

**George Steiner, *Real Presences*<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, M. W. (2003). *'Time's changeling': Autobiography in* The Echoes Return Slow. In Walford Davies, D. (Ed.). *Echoes to the amen: Essays after R.S. Thomas*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press  
(203)

## Introduction

Our mistakes are our leaps in the night. Error is not lie: it is approximation. Sign that we are on track.

Hélène Cixous<sup>2</sup>

This essay begins with a gesture, and a coincidence. The gesture comes to us through anecdote. Perhaps it never happened.

From the year 1967, until his retirement in 1978, the Welsh poet and priest R.S. Thomas served as vicar of Aberdaron. The village sits near the end of Pen Llŷn,<sup>3</sup> almost as far west as it is possible to go in Wales. Its church is hard up against the Irish Sea – only a stone wall keeps the waves from washing away the graves in its yard. There has been some kind of church here since the sixth century, when pilgrims used the site as a point of departure on their way to the holy island of Ynys Enlli, which lies only three kilometres off the coast, but is separated from the mainland by still-treacherous currents. It might have been in this very churchyard that the gesture occurred, but we have no way of knowing.

The anecdote comes to us in Byron Rogers' biography of the poet, *The Man Who Went into the West*. He uses it to illustrate how Thomas – a complex, even difficult, character – could be at times “extraordinarily rude.” “Once, Rogers writes, “after a funeral service he vaulted the church wall and was off, leaving the mourners still standing at the grave” (2006, p. 93). He gives no source of the account, and it is little more than a footnote to the larger story of the poet. But it comes back to us later in the book, when Christine Evans, a poet of Aberdaron, and perhaps the source of the earlier telling, mentions, “He was this odd mixture. He was quite capable of leaving grieving families at the graveside, and vaulting the wall to go home” (ibid., p.240). It's an extraordinary image. I picture a priest - dour, tall and agile - turn tail on his own parishioners, place one hand on the dry-stone wall of a churchyard, and vault it, leaving them open-mouthed in his wake.

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<sup>2</sup> (Cixous, 2010, p. 29)

<sup>3</sup> Known as the Llyn Peninsula in English

That is the gesture,<sup>4</sup> but there is also the coincidence.

In 1984, the Italian novelist and essayist, Italo Calvino, began work on a series of lectures to be delivered at Harvard in the following year. He found himself turning to the approaching millennium, and what it might bring for literature. He divided his lectures into six 'memos', each of which explored the concepts he thought would be most essential to the creative works of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Calvino died before he could complete all of the talks, but the first five were at least completed in draft form. The first of the lectures was to be on lightness (Calvino E. , 2002, p. i). Calvino, with his usual broad erudition, moves in the essay from discussions of the image of Perseus carrying the head of Medusa, to Leopardi's images of the moon, to a story by Kafka about a coal-bucket. It is his re-telling of one of Boccaccio's stories from *The Decameron* that concerns us here. It tells of an encounter between the philosopher Guido Cavalcanti and some young Florentine louts who decide to pick a quarrel with him. Cavalcanti is walking amongst the "great marble tombs" (Calvino, 2009, p. 12) of San Giovanni, when the louts, led by Messer Betto, charge their horses at him in play, and taunt him over his apparent lack of belief in God.

Guido, seeing himself surrounded by them, answered quickly: "Gentlemen, you may say anything you wish to me in your own home." Then, resting his hand on one of the great tombs and being very nimble, he leaped over it and, landing on the other side, made off and rid himself of them. (ibid.)

It was not so much Cavalcanti's "spirited reply" (ibid.) that interested Calvino – and nor is it what most interests me. What arrested me when I first read this excerpt, was, of course, the coincidence of the gesture. Cavalcanti's leap resembles, in more ways than one, R.S. Thomas's escape from his parishioners. Both poets shrug off gravity, and the material world. Calvino declares:

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<sup>4</sup> It could be said that this is not perhaps strictly a gesture, but an action. To me, gesture seems exactly the right word, since it implies an action that bears with it a meaning, an action done, that is, to make a point. The word has its origins in the Medieval Latin *gestura* "bearing, behavior," and can refer above all to a way of bearing the body. What else is the leap, in this instance, than just such an act of bearing? <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=gesture>

Were I to choose an auspicious image for the new millennium I would choose that one: the sudden agile leap of the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world, showing that with all his gravity he has the secret of lightness, and that what many consider to be the vitality of the times – noisy, aggressive, revving and roaring – belongs to the realm of death, like a cemetery for rusty old cars. (ibid.)

This, too, aligns with the temperament of the Welsh poet. Throughout his career, and increasingly towards the end of his life, Thomas had a mistrust of what he called the Machine. In his last complete collection, *No Truce with the Furies*, he writes, in the poem 'Then':

The bone's song will be:  
'Let me sleep. I am not  
Yeats. I cannot face  
over again the coming  
of the machine.(') (Thomas, 1995, p. 21)

The machine, for Thomas, has caused the retreat of God, and replaced God with itself (Morgan, 2009, p. 118). We have "made God small," he says in 'Raptor', another poem from *No Truce* (p. 52). For the many years he lived in Pen Llŷn, he would have been subjected to the roar of fighter jets as they left the RAF Valley airbase on nearby Anglesey.<sup>5</sup> Even in the mountains, it is still not uncommon to be, for example, on the crest of Cader Idris, and hear the air suddenly split by the jets training in the valleys below. It's enough to make anyone cantankerous. And of course, for the (mostly) pacifist Thomas, this revving and roaring of air force jets really did contain more than a whiff of death. There is an illustrative anecdote in Justin Wintle's biography, *Furious Interiors*, which says much about the attitude of R.S. Thomas toward the machines around him:

The receptionist there [at Tŷ Newydd, in Aberdaron] ... told me, when I

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<sup>5</sup> The airbase has been made famous as the workplace of the English prince, William of Wales; a fact that would perhaps have rankled even more with the fiercely nationalist Welshman.

enquired, that Thomas was famous in Pen Llŷn for annoying everybody by driving his white mini as slowly as he could and refusing to let anyone overtake him.

‘He is quite old, you know. Old people drive like that.’

‘Not him. He does it intentionally. He thinks people shouldn’t have cars.’

(1997, p. 345)

There is a certain hypocrisy here, of course, since Thomas himself has a car. It says much about the contradictory and contrary nature of the man. He was no Luddite – he used extensive metaphors of physics and astronomy in his poetry, for example – but he certainly did not appreciate the revving and roaring of motor vehicles disturbing the ancient peace of the Llŷn.

Who was this poet and priest, then? Ronald Stuart Thomas was born in Cardiff in 1913. His parents were Welsh, but he was raised to speak English. Though he later undertook the rather Herculean task of teaching himself fluent Welsh – a notoriously difficult language – Thomas would always be haunted by a sense of being exiled within his own country. It could be argued, anyway, that this sense is in fact part of the Welsh constitution. Wales has long been eclipsed by neighbouring England. I have often encountered people who do not believe that Wales has its own language. Indeed, the Welsh have been subject to campaigns to rid the country of its language, as in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when children in Welsh schools were given a lashing for speaking Welsh in the classroom.<sup>6</sup> It is no coincidence, I think, that one of the more well-known, and largely untranslatable words, in Welsh is *hiraeth*. The word means longing, especially longing for home; but it is the sort of longing that can overcome you, even when you are *at home*. “We are exiles within our own country;” writes Thomas in his poem ‘The Lost’:

we eat our bread  
at a pre-empted table. ‘Show us,’

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/history/sites/themes/society/language\\_education.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/history/sites/themes/society/language_education.shtml)

we supplicate, 'the way home',  
and they laughing hiss at us:  
'But you are home. Come in  
and endure it.' Will nobody  
explain what is like  
to be born lost? (2004, p. 218)

Thomas called his autobiography – written in Welsh – *Neb*; which means, loosely, “nobody”. It is possible, then, to hear the poet speaking to himself. “Will *nobody* /explain,” he says, “what it is like / to be born lost” (ibid., my emphasis). Indeed, in the course of the poem, Thomas / *Neb*, does in fact explain it. *Hiraeth* is as much a kind of resistance, as a kind of longing. Hélène Cixous writes:

Exile is an uncomfortable situation, though it is also a magical situation. I am not making light of the experience of exile. But we can endure it differently. Some exiles die of rage, some transform their exile into a country.

(1993, p. 120)

R.S. Thomas was never able to write poetry in Welsh. It was English, after all, that had taken up occupation in his subconscious. From this tension of longing for one language, but being forced to write of it in another, Thomas really did transform his exile into a kind of country. Still, he would never be at home in that ‘country’ either. In this sense, it is possible to see that the Welshman shares the territory of writers like Paul Celan, a Jew forced to write about the Holocaust in German but who, in doing so, broke down the German language and made of it something new. Indeed, R. S. Thomas’s condensation of, and frequent punning in, English can also be read as a way of undermining the surety of the language itself.

When the Japanese novelist, Kenzaburo Oe, discovered the poetry of Thomas on a tour of Wales, he saw a kinship between the Welshman and the German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin. “Both are concerned,” he wrote, “with the threshold

between the secular and the mystical.”<sup>7</sup> Benjamin was also an exile – he died fleeing Nazi-occupied France during World War II. In fact, in writing this essay on the leap, I have found that I keep turning to thinkers like Cixous, Simone Weil, Edward Said, Kafka, Benjamin and W.G. Sebald, all of whom in some way share Thomas’s sense of exile. But Oe is correct, much of what concerned Thomas throughout his career was the question of God. His biographer Justin Wintle called it a “sustained vigilance toward God” (1997, p. 115), a keen observation, since it recognises both Thomas’s dedication to God, and his wariness of Him. Thomas was 22 when he was ordained into the Church of Wales in 1935, and he served the church, as I have said, until 1978. Yet his was not an uncritical piety; certainly, in his poetry, he admitted to lapses of faith, and his God is rarely sure or safe. In this essay, I concentrate on Thomas’s late collection of poetry, *No Truce with the Furies*. In his poem, ‘Silence’, found in this collection, he writes:

The relation between us was  
silence; that and the feeling  
of each one being watched  
by the other: I by an  
enormous pupil in a blank  
face, he by one in a million  
wanderers in the darkness  
that was never a long way off  
from his presence. (1995, p. 83)

Vigilance does, indeed, seem the right word here. God, for Thomas, could be blank, or fierce, or even benevolent, but He was never simple. In *No Truce with the Furies*, as in other, earlier collections, Thomas conflates deity and raptor – in most cases, his “blank” face is also the blank face of the owl, a creature that watches with a cold, predatory eye, and might swoop upon its prey at any moment. Still, the image of the owl is not a simple one. At times, the owl also heralds the presence of Thomas’s first wife, Mildred ‘Elsi’ Eldridge, who died in 1991, four years before the publication of *No*

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5816/the-art-of-fiction-no-195-kenzaburo-oe>

Thomas's personality lent itself to caricature and, at times, he is described with some rancour. He and Elsi lived quiet lives, deeply interested in nature, and perhaps just as deeply disinterested in much of village life. Thomas, in particular, did not suffer fools easily. Wintle gives another telling account, this time of a visit to the couple in Aberdaron by Byron Rogers (who would later write a comprehensive, if not entirely balanced, biography of the poet).<sup>8</sup> It is worth recounting Rogers' experience in his own words:

The house is cold, even austere. Cold pastels, pale waxed wood, the white skulls of sheep and dogs laid on an old oak chest, Miss Eldridge's fantasies in ink. In one of the drawing rooms are the feathers and bodies of dead birds which both the Thomases pick up and preserve. In one of the poems he writes about 'the strict palate', 'the simple house'. After a half-hour of trying to be Heathcliff I asked if we might have a second bar of the fire. Thomas smiled, which is to say his lips curved suddenly downwards. 'My wife always said that people would freeze in our house.' (Wintle, 1997, p. 329)

Wintle rightly recognises that Rogers' "attempt at a more intimate portrait slides quickly into gothic caricature" (ibid).<sup>9</sup> It suited Thomas's readers, and critics, to see him as a grim and ascetic hermit, and it seems to have suited Thomas too, since, for one thing, in his interview with Rogers, he lied about having no friends. In fact, Rogers himself notices the slipperiness of Thomas, when the poet rises and invites the journalist for lunch, and makes a comment that might be mistaken for a slip of the tongue. "He paused at his bookcase, his face away from me. 'You can answer the rest of your questions after'" (ibid., p.330). Even Rogers knew this was no error on Thomas's part. It betrays a sense of humour, and hints that the persona Thomas

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<sup>8</sup> Rogers' biography is thorough, but his largely uncritical reliance on long quotes from, in particular, Thomas's only son, Gwydion, in order to build an image of R.S. as an uncaring, self-obsessed man, gives me pause.

<sup>9</sup> It should be said that this caricature stems from the poetry itself, which tends toward the pessimistic and is characterised by a strict economy with words, as well as a tendency to use austere, even grim, diction. Fellow poet Geoffrey Hill noted 70 uses of the word 'bone' in Thomas's poetry, and counted roughly 66 uses of 'blood' (2009, pp. 58-9, n.34).

offered to outsiders had little to do with the man himself. But it meant that he made enemies. The actor, Richard Burton, for example, wrote an astonishingly scathing description of Thomas in his recently published diaries:

The only nice poets I've ever met were bad poets and a bad poet is not a poet at all—ergo I've never met a nice poet ... For instance R. S. Thomas is a true minor poet but I'd rather share my journey to the other life with somebody more congenial. I think the last tight smile that he allowed to grimace his features was at the age of six when he realized with delight that death was inevitable. He has consigned his wife to hell for a long time. She will recognize it when she goes there.<sup>10</sup>

It's hard to imagine a less flattering portrait of a man, or a marriage (or indeed a poet!). Yet it doesn't ring true with many other accounts from people who knew Thomas. I was in Caernarfon, researching this paper, when the manager of The Castell approached me, curious to find a woman eating alone, night after night, in the pub. She asked me what I was there for, and I told her I was writing something on R.S. Thomas. "Oh," she said, clearly delighted, "he once baked me a cake!" This doesn't sound anything like the grim misanthrope we find in the accounts of Rogers or Burton. Later, I came across another account of much the same thing, from poet and critic Grevel Lindop, who was served a lemon-iced sponge cake on a visit to Thomas's home in 1997. "It was a very good cake, and when I said so Thomas looked gratified. 'I made it myself,' he confided, 'in an off moment.'"<sup>11</sup> These are small moments in a life, but I offer them as a counterpoint to the charge of pure misanthropy that might be levelled at Thomas. As for his marriage, Thomas's tender elegies to his wife still prove popular,<sup>12</sup> not least because they manage to be both sincere and restrained. It is these elegies that will most concern me here, because in startling ways they draw us to the poet's leap from the graveyard.

It is a risk to begin with a gesture. Is it possible for one moment from a poet's life to

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2012/10/16/in-which-richard-burton-discusses-poetry/>

<sup>11</sup> Lindop, G. (2004). An afternoon with R.S. Thomas. *PN review*, 30 (6), 56-58

<sup>12</sup> See Damian Walford Davies introduction to *Echoes to the Amen* (2009). Cardiff: University of Wales Press, p.5)

bear all this meaning? What can it really tell us about poetry itself? I would be lost, I admit, if it weren't that the leap can already be found in poetry. In 1975, the poet Robert Bly published a kind of manifesto – an idea, he called it, with poems and translations – titled *Leaping Poetry*. “In many ancient works,” he wrote:

we can notice a long floating leap at the centre of the work. That leap can be described as a leap from the conscious to the unconscious and back again, a leap from the known part of the mind to the unknown part and back to the known. (1975, p. 1)

Leaping in poetry, he goes on to say, is “the ability to associate fast” (ibid., p.4). Bly's essay is in some ways a lament. He finds this associative ability sadly lacking in English-language poetry. In his anthology, he provides the reader with examples of the leap in translations of the Spanish-language poets Federico García Lorca, Cesar Vallejo, Pablo Neruda, Blas de Otero and Juan Ramon Jiménez. He finds further examples in some Chinese and Japanese poets, as well as the Swedish poets Gunnar Ekelöf and Tomas Tranströmer. The brief poem, ‘Silence’, by Gregory Orr - one of the rare examples of the leap in a poem in English – gives us an idea of what Bly privileges in the leaping poem:

The way the word sinks deep into the snow of the page.

The dead deer lying in the clearing,  
its head and antlers transparent.  
The black seed in its brain  
parachuting toward earth. (ibid., p. 114)

The brevity of Orr's poem allows us to hold its three primary images in our minds almost at once. Orr does not bother with drawing the lines between the images. There is a lot of space here, which forces the leap. Bly is correct; this poem is stronger for the leap. If Orr had spelt it out, written something like, *the word sinks deep into the snow of the page, the way the black seed of the brain of a dead deer lying in a clearing also parachutes towards the earth*, we might appreciate the insight of the metaphor, but

most of the energy of the poem is immediately lost. The leap means the poet trusts in his words, and in the reader. Like most metaphoric language, it is generous, since it allows the reader to do the work, instead of holding our hands and guiding us to understand the poem's implications. In the process of the leap here, we find the poem contains more than its few lines suggest. There is a movement downward *through* the earth that carries with it words, and death, and the "black seed" of the deer's brain, an image that suggests something else will germinate there. As indeed, it does, in the mind of the reader.

Bly in part blames Christianity for inhibiting the leap in poetry, because "Christian ethics always embodied a move against the "animal instincts" (ibid., p. 2). Bly does not necessarily prove this point, but his phrasing here draws our attention to one of the characteristics of the leap in poetry: it is in some way *animal*. It will take some time to parse this idea – it's what concerns much of my discussion here. The leap, then, seems at odds with the work of a Christian poet like R.S. Thomas, and yet, I will argue, many of his late poems do indeed enact just this kind of leap. But then, Thomas always seems intent on upsetting our expectations. What we will find is that ambiguity, the animal, and the associative leap, are not only all present in the late poems of R.S. Thomas, but that they work to teach us something about what poetry is, and what it does to us.

It makes a kind of sense to take this leap and use it for myself. To use it as a technique that draws the reader on a kind of journey, to *move*. The leap in this essay is protean in character – we'll find it in poetic imagery, in metaphor, in translation. It will appear in the raptor's stoop and the approach of the hunter; in the abyss of comprehension, and the attempt to reach across that abyss; in the depth of grief and our attempts to speak of that grief. Poetry itself leaps. Let's count the ways.

## The swift image

But the writer is halfway into his image, there  
he travels at the same time eagle and mole.

Tomas Tranströmer, 'The Journey's Formulae'<sup>13</sup>

Most poets do not begin with ideas. We don't think, *it's time I said something of lightness*. More likely, we begin with an image. Or, an image rises in us. It wells up. The word *origin*, the poet Jane Hirshfield has recognised, comes to us through "the noun *origo* – the rising of a spring from its source in the earth" (Hirshfield, 1997, p. 34). The poet's image is always original, in this sense. It *springs*. (The spring as source of river and as leap share the same etymology). It is our first intimation of the leap. When we write, and an image comes to us – an image we might dare to call true - there is a catch in the breath, what we might lazily call a leap of the heart. When the filmmaker Werner Herzog learnt that his friend Lotte Eisner was dying in Paris, he set out on foot from Munich to visit her, in the half-spoken hope that his slow pilgrimage would also somehow delay her death. He kept a journal of the walk. On the road to Brienne, he wrote:

The loneliness today stretched out ahead of me towards the west, though I couldn't see that far as my eyesight let me down. I saw birds rising from an empty field, increasing ever more until the sky at last was filled with them, and I saw that they were coming from the womb of the Earth, from very deep down, where gravity is. ( 2009, p. 56)

This is how the poetic image rises. Light and precise as a bird, but coming from somewhere deeper than the surface of the earth.

To look at image, I want to begin not with R.S. Thomas, but with a poem of the Swede, Tomas Tranströmer. Robert Bly, who was an early translator of Tranströmer, writes in *The Winged Energy of Delight* that Tranströmer has "a strange genius for the image – image comes up almost effortlessly. The images flow upward like water rising in some lonely place, in the swamps, or deep fir woods" (2005, p. 1). Here is Tranströmer's

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<sup>13</sup> Tranströmer, T. (2006). *The great enigma: new collected poems* (R. Fulton, Trans.). New York: New Directions, p.42

poem, 'The Journey's Formulae':

1

A murmur of voices behind the plowman.  
He doesn't look around. The empty fields.  
A murmur of voices behind the plowman.  
One by one the shadows break loose  
and plunge into the summer sky's abyss.

2

Four oxen come, under the sky.  
Nothing proud about them. And the dust thick  
as wool. The insects' pens scrape.

A swirl of horses, lean as in  
grey allegories of the plague.  
Nothing gentle about them. The sun raves.

3

The stable-smelling village with thin dogs.  
The party official in the market square  
in the stable-smelling village with white houses.

His heaven accompanies him: it is high  
and narrow like inside a minaret.  
The wing-trailing village on the hillside.

4

An old house has shot itself in the forehead.  
Two boys kick a ball in the twilight.  
A swarm of rapid echoes. – Suddenly, starlight.

5

On the road in the long darkness. My wristwatch  
gleams obstinately with time's imprisoned insect.

The quiet in the crowded compartment is dense.  
In the darkness the meadows stream past.

But the writer is halfway into his image, there  
he travels, at the same time eagle and mole. (2006, p. 41)

I choose to talk about this poem because in it we find a master of image talking *about* image. Ostensibly, it's a simple poem, its language uncomplicated. The tone is detached, although not disinterested. It opens with a murmuring of voices and a plowman (no, *the* plowman) who keeps his back to the voices. Around him, empty fields. Then the poet repeats. *A murmuring of voices behind the plowman*. This seems like nothing. Until we think, what are *they* then? If the field is empty, whose voices are they? Shadows, says Tranströmer, that *break loose and plunge into the abyss of the sky*. Everything is immediately upturned. The sky is below us, an abyss. We are left with an image entirely unsaid by the poet. Since nothing else flocks into the sky in great numbers, we are left with the image of birds. Death-haunted birds, since these are still also shadows with voices. And the man, at work – ignoring, or ignorant of, what rises behind him.

From here, the poet takes the perspective of the bird for himself. It is as if, having seen the bird-shadows lift, we can also lift with them. We see now oxen, presumably in other fields, since the first fields were empty. We see horses in a swirl, a shape we could only see from above. The eye has moved, and it has moved as a bird might.

Yet we don't abandon the human perspective either. At first glance, Tranströmer's

poem seems almost empty of all rhetoric. But when, in the third part, we encounter the party official, it is in the stink of a stable-smelling village, surrounded by 'thin' dogs (the horses too are lean; all the animals here are unable to sustain the allegories we might try to apply to them). The party official carries his heaven with him, but it is, as Tranströmer puts it, *narrow inside*, unlike the great abyss of sky we have encountered in the first stanza. Perhaps, we are not as detached from the images of this poem as we might believe. Instead, we don't trust the heaven of this party official – it seems as starved as the dogs at his feet.

This distrust is not eased by the swift change of perspective we again encounter in the fourth part. We move from the heaven of the official to a house that has shot itself in the forehead. This image is startling. To picture a wound in the head of a house is powerful enough, but the image of an old house that has shot *itself* is utterly alien and yet somehow human, ugly. We are wrong-footed again. We are shown violence, and then are made to turn from it, to the image of two boys playing ball in the sunlight. There should be nothing but innocence there, but Tranströmer follows it with the line, "A swarm of rapid echoes." We hear, then, the hollow sound of ball against foot, a series of rapid sounds, like gunfire. He is alerting us to echoes, not just here but throughout the poem. Listen, he is saying, what else resonates back and forth? But we don't have time, just yet, to go back. We are, suddenly, away from the sunlight, the boys, the echoes.

The poet here is unrelenting. He won't let us rest with the images yet. "He's so unbelievably fast!" said Bly of Tranströmer,<sup>14</sup> not, I suspect, without envy, or even exasperation. Fast, yes, but also somehow measured. The images are uncluttered. But they wheel away beneath us.

In the last stanza it is now darkness. We are with the writer himself. We encounter, at last, an 'I'. He rides through meadows<sup>15</sup> in a densely crowded compartment. The only light seems to come from "time's imprisoned insect," the glow of his watch. We have

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<sup>14</sup> [http://www.robertbly.com/int\\_4.html](http://www.robertbly.com/int_4.html)

<sup>15</sup> I suspect this is a rail, and that Fulton, here, has translated *på väg* as 'on the road', rather than 'on the way', without considering that the writer is in a compartment, rather than, say, at the wheel of a car.

come upon insects already. They were scraping their pens. It seems there is some affiliation here, between poet and insect, in the small, workaday behaviour, work that goes on despite the passage of time. The poet is time-imprisoned, and imprisoned in a darkened compartment, shuttled along a railroad. Yet, the writer is also not there. He is *halfway into his image, there / he travels, at the same time eagle and mole*.

We see now that the image that opened the poem is the same image that comes to the writer as he hurtles through darkness. We are sent back to the beginning. We see, now, how the poet has eagled about his image, even as he is left half-blind to the human world. The work in time is twofold. It involves a shutting off, a withdrawal, which, we will see, is almost violent; and it involves escape. One is not possible without the other. The writer cannot enter his image unless he is also somehow blind to the immediate world around him.<sup>16</sup>

Tranströmer began this poem because he was haunted by image. In a 1956 letter to Göran Palm he wrote:

“Here is a man plowing. It means something. Why have I now for half a year seen this man plowing? No, it’ll soon be a whole year. What does it mean? A month ago I finally understood what would happen. It’s in Yugoslavia. At first I thought it was in a Swedish landscape in autumn – I was tricked by the lighting. No, it’s Yugoslavia, in the middle of the day, and the sun is burning. It has something to do with the war. Or at least there are many dead people in the background – they move away later but what is really going on? It’s no epic, it’s a bagatelle, five lines perhaps. Yet terribly important to me ... (Fulton, 2006, p. xvii)

Tranströmer doesn’t say whether this image, of the man plowing, is something he once saw, or something that came to him, arose out of the ground of himself, silent as the

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<sup>16</sup> I wonder how much it matters that Fulton, in his translation, has reversed the order of the two creatures, presumably in order to retain a certain rhythm. The Swedish reads, “*och färdas där på en gång mullvad och örn*.” And travels there at once mole (*mullvad*) and eagle (*örn*). It is quite a difference, to end with the image of a soaring eagle, rather than the tunnelling mole.

fields in which the plowman stands. Robin Fulton, in speaking of *Secrets of the Way*, the collection to which this poem belongs, notices that in Tranströmer's poetry:

a series of contrasts, or similes, or just luminously clear images are grouped as if around a central space where some kind of epiphany is happening. Such poems end by returning us, perhaps abruptly, to an active world, but they leave us with the feeling that a strangeness has crossed our path. (ibid., p. xv)

But what epiphany has occurred here? This does not strike me as a poem of epiphany, or if it is, it is as if we are seeing the epiphany only through its aftermath, a series of echoing scenes. Somewhere, something happened. Something violent. War, maybe. But all we hear and see now are reverberations. *It's no epic, it's a bagatelle, five lines perhaps. Yet terribly important to me ...* It is possible that this poem is simply inadequate to its task. That it really is a bagatelle. Or it could be that Tranströmer here acknowledges that all poems are inadequate to the task of describing.

Like the poem itself, the horses are lean, grey allegories. There's a weariness to them. But they are not gentle. Nor are the oxen, as we might imagine or expect, proud. The dogs are underfed. The birds are not even there at all, shadows at best. There's a feeling, says Bly, "that Tranströmer is closer to some silent energy in the middle of the universe than the rest of us are."<sup>17</sup> He seems to have tapped his spring. He trusts his images, to speak even of what is absent. Yet, this master of image-making, when he writes about image, doesn't direct us to the Muse. He shows us the hard-working writer, scraping his pen, imprisoned by time. Then, he directs us, at the very last, to dwell with the animal.

Animals circle, and even inhabit, our lives, but we are curiously blind to them. In his extraordinary essay, 'Why Look at Animals?', John Berger recognises that "by no other species except man will the animal's look be recognised as familiar. Other animals are held by the look. Man becomes aware of himself returning the look" (2002, p. 260). But the animal, on the other hand, "scrutinises him across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension" (ibid.). That is, we look at the animal and see ourselves - but the

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<sup>17</sup> [http://www.robertbly.com/int\\_4.html](http://www.robertbly.com/int_4.html)

animal does not return the look of recognition. This may be less true of domesticated pets. For now, I speak of wild animals. No doubt there are exceptions, but there is almost always this abyss, this breach, between the human and the wild animal. Perhaps for this exact reason, Berger goes on to recognise that “it is not unreasonable to suppose that the first metaphor was animal” (ibid., p. 261). Further, if this was so, “it was because the essential relation between man and animal was metaphoric” (ibid.). What does he mean here? Metaphor comes from the Greek *metapherein* – to transfer, carry between, or bear across.<sup>18</sup> Metaphors both move, and carry weight. When we read a metaphor, the mind leaps between the one thing and the other. This is true of other figurative language like simile and metonym. Consider the lines: “A swirl of horses, lean as in / grey allegories of the plague.” The poet is asking us to shift quickly, from a shape (the swirl) to the physicality of the horses themselves. They are lean, but there is the double meaning (though not in the Swedish original)<sup>19</sup> that suggests they might also be leaning. We move again to a colour (grey), and then an abstraction (allegories) and an event (the plague). That the mind is capable of this at all is extraordinary. We are remaking the mind, and our perception of the world, as we read. Two things, not at all literally connected, are brought into proximity in the mind. Both images – this is essential – are in some way changed by the proximity. It is almost impossible, I suspect, to unmake a metaphor.

But what might a metaphoric *relationship* entail? The kind, that is, that Berger sees between human and animal? It must, too, be a leaping across. Remember there is an abyss between the two. Yet, we want to move towards the animal. Physically it is impossible. Somehow, *metaphorically*, it is not. It might, in fact, be the only way to approach the animal and remain there.

Why would a poet do such a thing? This is a question of limit, of horizons we cannot cross on our own. It must be something to do with the inaccessibility of the world, even of truth.

R. S. Thomas intuits something when he says, in ‘Incarnations’, “Show me the

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<sup>18</sup> OED, p.1315

<sup>19</sup> The Swedish *magra* means lean, skinny, or meagre, and does not carry the other meaning of lean, as of something on a slant. <http://en.bab.la/dictionary/english-swedish/lean>

dreamless man, // the prose man, the man imprisoned / by his horizons" (2004, p. 241). He hints that it is poetry that remains open to dreaming, that offers us some movement outside of our own horizon. "Our metaphors go on ahead of us, they know before we do," says the poet Mark Doty.<sup>20</sup> It as if we can send our metaphors out to scout the horizon and return to us something new, like the dove in the myth of the flood.

Perhaps it is for this reason that, of all creatures, it is the bird that most shifts the poetic horizon. During one year in the mid-60's, the reclusive writer J.A. Baker spent the months between October and April near his home in Suffolk observing a pair of peregrines . In his introduction to a reprint of Baker's book, Robert MacFarlane writes:

*The Peregrine* is not a book about watching a bird, it is a book about becoming a bird ... Baker hopes that, through a fierce, prolonged, and "purified" concentration upon the peregrine, he will somehow be able to escape his human form and abscond into the "brilliant" wildness of the bird. (2005, p. viii)

The book is utterly poetic, hypnotic. Baker traces the peregrine via its kills, spends long hours motionless, just to catch a glance of one of the pair wheeling, stooping, or at rest in the woods. It is worth quoting one passage at length:

By two o'clock I had been to all the peregrine's usual perching places, but had not found him. Standing in the fields near the north orchard, I shut my eyes and tried to crystallise my will into the light-drenched prism of the hawk's mind. Warm and firm-footed in long grass smelling of the sun, I sank into the skin and blood and bones of the hawk. The ground became a branch to my feet, the sun on my eyelids was heavy and warm. Like the hawk, I heard and hated the sound of man, that faceless horror of the stony places. I stifled in the same filthy sack of fear. I shared the same hunter's longing for the wild home none can know, alone with the sight and smell of the quarry, under the indifferent sky. I felt the pull of the north, the mystery and fascination of the migrating gulls. I shared

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15847>

the same strange yearning to be gone. I sank down and slept into the feather-light sleep of the hawk. Then I woke him with my waking.

He flew eagerly up from the orchard and circled above me, looking down, his shining eyes fearless and bland. He came lower, turning his head from side to side, bewildered, curious. He was like a wild hawk fluttering miserably above the cage of a tame one. Suddenly he jerked in the air as though shot, stalled, wrenched himself violently away from me. He defecated in anguish of fear, and was gone before the white necklace of sun-glittered faeces reached the ground. (2005, pp. 144-5)

The transformation is almost unimaginable. Yet Baker does not say it is imagined. It is briefly, brilliantly actual. Even the peregrine, normally separated from us by an abyss of non-comprehension, has a moment of recognition. In the end, however, it is, the recognition of a wild animal looking down upon the caged. It is not possible to remain with, or of, the bird. We must come back to earth. The animal will go its own way.

This movement into the animal or bird recurs in poetry, once you begin to seek it. It is rarely a complete transformation, but usually an inhabiting, if only briefly, of perspective. We find it in Galway Kinnell's 'The Bear', in which the hunter falls to dreaming of the dying bear he chases, but is never sure whether he awakes from the dream. The long poem ends with this uncertainty:

the rest of my days I spend  
wandering: wondering  
what, anyway,  
was that sticky infusion, that rank flavour of blood, that poetry, by which I  
lived?

(2001, p. 61)

We see it too in Rilke, who wrote 'The Panther' after an encounter in the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris. It paces ceaselessly in its cage:

Only at times, the curtain of the pupils

lifts, quietly—. An image enters in,  
rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles,  
plunges into the heart and is gone . (1987, p. 25)

The poem is a clear influence on Ted Hughes' poem 'The Jaguar', in which we find another caged beast:

He spins from the bars, but there's no cage to him

More than to the visionary his cell:

His stride is wildernesses of freedom:

The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel.

Over the cage floor the horizons come. (1995, p. 6)<sup>21</sup>

Once again, we can hear echoes of Rilke in R.S. Thomas's poem, 'The White Tiger', in which, once more, a poet faces the tiger in its cage. This time, the tiger breathes:

as you can image that

God breathes within the confines

of our definition of him, agonising

over immensities that will not return. (1993, p. 358)

Each of these poets<sup>22</sup> describes a brief moment of affinity with the creature. In each case, these encounters say something about poetry. In the three poems on the wild cat, the poets seem to intuit that the caged creature is still somehow capable of breaching the horizons that limit the poet. In Rilke's case, it is *image* that enters the arrested (what a perfect word) muscles of the panther, and that carries with it the wild outside world. Hughes' magnificent image of the horizon coming in over the caged floor holds the same immensities that we find in Thomas's poem, though Thomas is

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<sup>21</sup> Hughes clearly felt a deep affinity with the jaguar – he returned to its image several times throughout his life, even sculpting a small image of one in 1967.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/dec/31/ted-hughes-jaguar-sculpture-sale>

<sup>22</sup> All of them are, it should be noted, men. There is not room here to study what this might say about male poets and predators.

more pessimistic as to how much freedom this offers. Indeed, we might remember the “prose man” who is imprisoned by horizons. The poet is not such a prisoner; and neither, it seems, is the animal, even when it is caged.

But it is not that simple. These are not just any animal: all of the poets here feel kinship with a predator. Kinnell is the most explicit, since poetry is for him paralleled with a sticky infusion, with the “rank flavour of blood.” How is a poet like a predator? For Kinnell, poetry is the blood by which he lives. Poetry is not decoration, it is essential and, ultimately, violent. The blood is *rank* in flavour – we assume the poet means it in the sense of offensively strong; but rank can also mean *violent*. And this blood has been in the *mouth* – how else might we know its flavour? Robert Bly wanted poets to work what he called the “deep image,” but he did not mean it to suggest “a geographical location in the psyche,” but rather preferred “a notion of the poetic image which involves psychic energy and movement.”<sup>23</sup> Kevin Bushell draws our attention to an essay from Bly, in which he explains the phenomenon more deeply:

Let's imagine a poem as if it were an animal. When animals run, they have considerable flowing rhythms. Also they have bodies. An image is simply a body where psychic energy is free to move around. Psychic energy can't move well in a non-image statement.<sup>24</sup>

We have already seen that Bly favours poems that move from image to image, or indeed within image. The question is, what kind of movement is it? Kinnell, Rilke, Hughes and Thomas provide us with a disturbing answer. The movement is *violent*.

## Something in violent movement

In the moment of writing (and of reading, too) we lose ourselves. I mean this more literally than the cliché suggests. For a time, the writer is not present. To say you lose yourself implies pleasure, but also erasure. The world is obliterated. Wiped out, with a

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<sup>23</sup> [http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a\\_f/bly/bushell.html](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/a_f/bly/bushell.html)

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

fingertip. "When I write I escape myself, I uproot myself," writes Hélène Cixous in her book *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*. "The moment I pick up my pen – magical gesture – I forget all the people I love; an hour later they are not born and I have never known them. Yet we do return. But for the duration of the journey we are killers" (1993, p. 21). For a time - it is not forever – the act of writing is one of murder.

Cixous argues that to begin writing, we must have death. "We must have death," she says, "but young, present, ferocious, fresh death, the death of the day, today's death" (ibid., p. 7). She titles one of her chapters 'That the Act of Reading or Writing Be a Mortal Act; or Reading/Writing, Escape in Broad Daylight'. The act is twofold – an act of killing and an act of escape. Cixous draws our attention to Thomas Bernhard's short text, "Montaigne", in which the author describes fleeing his family to read, in a tower, a book by Montaigne. She recognises in her essay that in the act of reading and writing, since we kill off the world, we also inspire murderous thoughts in those others we would obliterate. We flee *them*. Bernhard's short piece ends with the image of "my family, which was looking for me and roaming round the foot of the tower in search of me" (ibid., p. 24). Ostensibly, the family is worried about him, but there is something menacing about the way they roam around, as if they were hungry wolves, waiting for their prey to descend. So there is death – the brief murder of the world – and the threat of death, that pushes us to attempt the escape.

We see it in Kafka<sup>25</sup>, who wrote, enigmatically, in his diaries: "Escaped them. Some kind of nimble jump" (Calasso, 2005, p. 126). He never explains who *they* are, though Calasso goes on to note that:

In K's first story, 'The Judgement', father and son argue. "And the father concludes: "I sentence you now to death by drowning!" The son feels "driven from the room" and makes a dash for the bridge. He throws himself nimbly into the river, yelling: "Dear parents, still I've always loved you." (ibid., p.134)

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<sup>25</sup> Kafka is a fitting companion here. After all, he is another who, from time to time, sends animals out as emissaries in his writing. Cixous recognises this when she writes, that for Kafka, dogs are "bearers of a specific vision of the world" (1993, p. 132).

Again, it is family that the writer feels most compelled to escape. This may simply be because the family is closest – it is they who are most concerned when we wipe out our world, since, for a large part, they constitute it. We see it, too, in R.S. Thomas, who fled his own congregation by leaping a graveyard wall. Who wrote, once, “Dear parents, / I forgive you my life” (1993, p. 127), a phrase that curiously echoes the last lines of Kafka’s story. The imperative to leap is often a violent one, though we may not recognise it as such.<sup>26</sup>

“All great texts begin in this matter that *breaks*: they break with our thought habits, with the world around us, in an extreme violence that is due to rapidity” (Cixous, 1993, p. 59). Why is the movement of texts, of poetry, at times violent? For one thing, it is rapid. Perhaps, also, all acts of concentration are violent. Writing, as I have already noted, obliterates in the moment of concentration. It is itself a concentration of what the philosopher Simone Weil sees in our very act of living. “God,” she says, “is crucified from the fact that finite beings, subject to necessity, to space and to time, think. I have to know that as a thinking, finite being I am God crucified” (2009, p. 89). That is, in Christian thinking, we have to accept that if God is the infinite – of neither time nor space, but outside it – then in creating us, we who live in the *intersection* of time and space, he has in effect crucified himself. It is not entirely blasphemous to see, then, that the story of Christ crucified on the cross serves as a metaphor for an even larger sacrifice.

Tomas Tranströmer intuits this in the final lines of his poem ‘In the Open’:

The sun scorches. The plane flies low  
throwing a shadow in the form of a large cross  
rushing forward on the ground.  
A man is crouching in the field at something.  
The shadow comes.

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<sup>26</sup> There is also a rare moment in Kafka’s diaries in which, Calasso recognises, writing appears “as the one way to free oneself from (*hinausspringen*, “to leap out of,” is Kafka’s strongly dynamic verb) the murderous chain of action and reaction, forged from matter and mind, that otherwise constricts and coerces our lives” (2005, p. 125).

For a fraction of a second he is in the middle of the cross.

I have seen the cross that hangs under the cool church vaults.

Sometimes it's like a snapshot

of something in violent movement. (2006, p. 95)

The poet recognises here that the bent man, caught in an act of concentration, briefly becomes the centre of something. In the same way, the static cross is also caught. It is also concentrated. What we see of it, he says, is indeed not a static object, but a snapshot of something in motion. It is not simply motion, however – it is *violent movement*.<sup>27</sup> Something has been violated. Just as ours is not an innocent existence – not even when we are simply crouched in a field. Jane Hirshfield considers the etymology of the word ‘concentration’, and concludes that “concentration’s essence is kinetic” (1997, p. 6). We think of the act of concentration as one of stillness, but these poets suggest otherwise. We choose what we concentrate on, and move toward it, to the exclusion of the rest of existence. Poetry is highly concentrated. Even when it speaks of large things, it rarely speaks of many (and when it does speak of the many, we are rushed between one thing and another, since the poem remains sequential, as do our minds). This is at least part of what Calvino meant when, speaking of lightness, he said that, “we are concerned with something marked by three characteristics: (1) it is to the highest degree light; (2) it is in motion; (3) it is a vector of information” (2009, p. 13). The cross, as we generally think of it, fulfils only one of these demands – it is a vector. But Tranströmer, Weil and Hirshfield show us a cross that is also in motion.

There is an early, short poem by R.S. Thomas, called ‘Pietà’, in which we encounter another way of looking at the cross:

Always the same hills

Crowd the horizon,

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<sup>27</sup> We can see that this violent movement is again mimicked in the way Tranströmer abruptly shifts our attention from the scorched and open plains to the cool, vaulted church. We have to zoom in our focus quickly. This image, unsurprisingly, makes me think of the eagle, which can do just such a thing with its own eyes. (<http://www.learner.org/jnorth/tm/eagle/VisionA.html>)

Remote witnesses

Of the still scene.

And in the foreground

The tall Cross,

Sombre, untenanted,

Aches for the Body

That is back in the cradle

Of a maid's arms. (1993, p. 159)

It begins almost wearily. *Always those same hills*: as if this happens all the time.

Thomas establishes this as a “still scene”, little more than a landscape with figures. This is expected, since the Pieta is a static depiction, found in sculpture and painting. What is unexpected is the foregrounding of the cross. The subject of the Pieta is always Mary, who holds the body of her full-grown son as she had once cradled him in infancy. Its pathos lies in its physical intimacy – the best Pietas, I’ve found, bring the flesh alive; you can see Mary’s hands pressed into Jesus’ torn side, imagine the very weight of the body. In the poem, of course, the grief does not belong to the mother, but to the cross. It, too, aches for the body of Christ. It’s impossible, this grief, and yet it doesn’t seem so. Much of the power of this image, I believe, lies in that word, ‘untenanted.’

‘Untenanted’ finds its roots in ‘tenant’, from the Latin *tenere*, ‘to hold’ (OED, p.2260). By untenanted, here, Thomas clearly means empty. Yet, he doesn’t use the word ‘empty’. He uses a word that means *unheld*.<sup>28</sup> It is the cross that is unheld, not the body. One of poetry’s great economies is that in suggesting that something is *not*, it simultaneously suggests that it has been, or might have been. In reading ‘untenanted’, we see how the body once hung on the cross, though it is now in the arms of Mary. We see how the cross was tenanted, and is not any longer; how it held and was held, and how *it* feels the lack of holding as a physical ache. It is a real risk to personify the cross

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas describes the cross as ‘untenanted’ again in his poem ‘In Church’, which closes off the collection *Pietà* (1966), and later uses the word in ‘Night Sky’, from *Frequencies* (1978) –although this time he applies it to space, rather than the cross. It suggests to me a word carefully considered.

in this way, and yet it captures something of the real sorrow of the crucifixion story, of the true loneliness at its centre. Everyone – *everything* – here seems to lose.

Yet, for our purposes, isn't the cross truly static? As fixed as possible, rooted into the foreground? Yes, and no. Richard Mabey, in a discussion of the vertical and horizontal tension inherent in images of the cross, says:

the vertical is simultaneously the human and the sacred, earth-bound but reaching up towards the sky. This is what classically the minaret, the tower, the steeple and the cross<sup>29</sup> in the landscape sought to symbolise; today, however, other emblems of human endeavour take their place. As to the horizontal axis, this then is the plane of action, of movement and, over time, the creation of place and dwelling. (2010, pp. 68-9)

The word that leaps out at me here is *earth-bound*. Mabey presumably means that it is bound to the earth. Still, we can also read it as bound for earth, heading *toward* it. *Earth-bound but reaching up*. This is what Simone Weil believed. "The cross. The tree of sin was a real tree," she wrote, "the tree of life was a wooden beam. Something which does not give fruit, but only vertical movement. 'The Son of Man must be lifted up and he will draw all men unto himself'" (2009, p. 88). The vertical movement is not in a single direction – it is both the reaching towards God, and for Weil, God reaching towards us. At the same time, since they also draw our attention to the horizontal axis, these images of the cross are also about the plane of action, movement, and time.<sup>30</sup> They depend on these very things for their tension. A cross is truly an intersection, in the sense that we might think of a traffic intersection, built entirely around the movement of things. In Thomas's poem, ultimately, it is the cross that is the subject. It is the thing that moves, and does. Longs and holds.

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<sup>29</sup> I don't believe it is coincidence that we find the minaret in Tranströmer's 'The Journey's Formulae', or that Cixous spends so much time considering the tower in her discussion of Bernhard. These images, as Mabey says, contain "an axial tension which continues to exert a dramatic hold on the Western visual tradition" (2010, p. 68).

<sup>30</sup> The vector of time and space is also in motion because time is in motion. We may remain physically still, but time – as we perceive it, at least – streams about us. (Another way in which this might be considered violent is that each moment of existence, each choice, obliterates all the other possible worlds around us. Again, we kill – we as vectors, crucify – the infinite, utterly thoughtlessly).

As a priest, it is unsurprising to find Thomas working with the image of the cross. In his later writing he uses it with less frequency, preferring other motifs: the abyss; the laboratory; the predator.<sup>31</sup> Yet, Dyson argues, “Thomas is now, as always, a poet of the Cross; and the Cross without the exegesis or piety of the ages to help it – more than ever facing us with its own starkness, as God’s side of the dialogue” (1990, p. 269). Is this possible, if he no longer uses its image? Yes, because he still uses the raptor. To reiterate Mabey: “other emblems of human endeavour” (2010, pp. 68-9) have taken the place of the cross, minaret and tower. In Thomas’s case, I believe the raptor functions in a similar way, confronting us with this starkness of a God that is crucified and crucifies.



**Figure 3: Details from the Isenheim Altarpiece**

There is an extraordinary moment in John Berger’s essay on the 16th century painter Matthias Grünewald, in which he recognises the intersection of the crucified Christ and the bird. Grünewald was commissioned to paint the Isenheim altarpiece for an Antonine hospice, which treated victims of the

plague, syphilis, St Anthony’s fire, and other physical diseases. The altarpiece is unique in its depiction of the suffering of Christ on the cross. His entire body is covered in sores or wounds; hands tense, almost in spasm, beneath the nails. Berger finds himself drawn to the lacerations on the body. He admits they might be from a whip, or thorns, or even depictions of “the sores of the sick.” But, he says, “the uniformity of the marks over the entire body makes both these explanations rather unconvincing” (2002, p. 137). He has noted already Grünewald’s apparent fascination with feathers; in the details of the angel Gabriel, in an inexplicably fully-feathered angel, even in the textures of other objects – palm trees, the robe of St Paul – which resemble feathering.

*Surely the overall appearance of Christ’s body is more than anything suggestive of a bird that has had its feathers plucked? Surely here Grünewald was being*

<sup>31</sup>Even so, Rowan Williams recognises that Thomas’s use of “the raptor, the vivisectionist, the experimenter” reinforces “a sense of divine cruelty” (2009, p. 213).

obedient to an imaginative compulsion, emotionally charged beyond the possibility of all the narrative logic? (ibid.)

Berger concludes that the de-feathered Christ is a symbol of man stripped of power, “stripped naked unto death” (ibid.). This may well be so – but might there be some other imaginative compulsion than this? Grünewald’s other uses of feathers are not necessarily suggestive of power. It is as if, from time to time, he simply sees their presence in the physical world – as you might see, if you were religious, the presence of God. Here it is, this presence: in a tree, in a robe, in a crown. If these feathers are about presence, what of the Christ stripped naked unto death? He, then, is stripped not only of power, but of holy presence. Or perhaps we can be more literal. Perhaps Grünewald imagined that God is also a bird. The greatest of wounds, then, is to be no longer bird, but a man, nailed down and torn of its feathers. Pinned down, we might say, in the finite. We might also say, then, that the crucified Christ is all of these things.<sup>32</sup>

In Thomas’s long poem from 1953, ‘The Minister’, he writes, “O, but God is in the throat of a bird” (1993, p. 43). A plain reading of this would suggest that God is in the song of a bird. Yet, in his discussion of this moment, Christopher Morgan asks (as Tony Conran had before him): “what is infinite and yet ‘in the throat of a bird,’ loving yet willing that bird to die in agony” (2009, pp. 52-3)? Indeed, if the infinite God is crucified in his reduction to the throat of a bird, there is a kind of love here. Morgan and Conran suggest, he might also be choking the bird – since nothing can remain in the throat for long without killing us. This image is even more fraught if, as we find him to be in Thomas’s later works, God is in the throat of a raptor. Then, he is both prey – the thing consumed, half-swallowed; and predator – since he is *in* the throat, as presence, we might say he is the thing that consumes. He is also what or who we hear when the bird cries out. Morgan in particular finds himself interested in and concerned, “first, with the intersection of time and eternity in nature, with that which is ‘infinite’ and yet ‘in the throat of a bird’, and second, with the apparent contradiction of divine love and natural violence” (ibid., p. 53). I would argue that these two concerns are hardly

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<sup>32</sup> “the cross is the central reality in a world of time and space and it throws its shadow across the countryside, across the field of nature and across human lives.” (R.S. Thomas, in Brown, 2009, p.100)

separate at all.

“Let us stand, then, in the interval / of our wounding,” writes R.S. Thomas in ‘Evening’, a poem found in *No Truce with the Furies* (p. 19). This, like many of the poems from this collection, is a poem about time. An interval is a space found between actions or events, a pause, a period of cessation.<sup>33</sup> Still, there is true ambiguity in this line from Thomas. The interval of our wounding can be read as a rest from our wounding, a cessation of it – or it can equally be read as a space created by our wounding, a place in which we must rest, in order to receive what follows. It is the *of* here that provides the ambiguity.<sup>34</sup> Had the poet said an interval *from* our wounding, we could have rested, ourselves, in a single meaning. Christopher Morgan recognises in R.S. Thomas an “‘inbetweenness’ or ‘wounding’” (2009, p. 5), which he attributes to the linguistic and cultural tension in Thomas’s life. Such inbetweenness is present here – and so is the wound, whatever its source. The entire poem itself is, at first glance, fairly simple – almost too pretty:

The archer with time  
as his arrow – has he broken  
his strings that the rainbow  
is so quiet over our village?

Let us stand, then, in the interval  
of our wounding, till the silence  
turn golden and love is  
a moment eternally overflowing.<sup>35</sup>

It is the ambiguity of the wounding that rescues this poem from triteness (it is very risky indeed to speak of golden silence and eternally overflowing love!). It is as if this

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<sup>33</sup> Etymologically, it comes from the Latin for the space between ramparts. (OED, p.1100)

<sup>34</sup> There is a third possible reading of this – again it is the *of* that allows for it: that the interval *itself* is a wound. This speaks back to our idea of the moment crucifying eternity.

<sup>35</sup> In Thomas’s poem, ‘Sorry’, in which we can find those line, ‘Dear parents, I forgive you my life’, he once again ties the arrow and wounding together, writing: “It was not your fault./ What should have gone on, / Arrow aimed from a tried bow / At a tried target, has turned back, / Wounding itself / With questions you had not asked” (1993, p. 127). Thomas here recognises that the wound, the punctum, is at times self-inflicted.

one golden moment is reliant on wounding; and this speaks of a God (or universe) that not only allows, but perhaps even demands, suffering, in order for love to be attained.

Here, we might speak of the *punctum*, a wound that is an intersection. The *punctum*, as the theorist Roland Barthes recognises it, in *Camera Lucida*, is:

this element which rises from a scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation ... (2000, p. 26)

Barthes uses the *punctum* to talk of what wounds him in particular photographs, but it is of use to us here too.<sup>36</sup> We see here, for one thing, a little leap. The *punctum jumps out* at us, it rises and shoots out and pierces. In the case of poetry, this might be a simple word, or a phrase. I find *punctum*, for example, in a single line of one of Raymond Carver's last poems, 'Woman Bathing':

Naches River. Just below the falls.  
Twenty miles from any town. A day  
of dense sunlight  
heavy with odors of love.  
*How long have we?*  
Already your body, sharpness of Picasso,  
is drying in this highland air.  
I towel down your back, your hips,  
with my undershirt.

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<sup>36</sup> The poet John Stammers' delivered a craft talk for the 2012 Aldeburgh Poetry Festival (recorded later by Katy Evans Bush), in which he too attempted to align the idea of the photographic *punctum* with the poetic line, an alignment he found in "the telling phrase or statement embedded in the poem, often but not always somewhere near the end of it, that encapsulates or enacts the point of the whole poem. He says it's sometimes even a phrase that could be used as a title for the poem, but in any case, like a title, it tells you what the poem's about, and maybe where you are within that."

<http://www.thepoetrytrust.org/festblog/festblog-article/and-the-punctum-of-the-poem-is/>

Time is a mountain lion.  
We laugh at nothing,  
and as I touch your breasts  
even the ground-  
                    squirrels  
are dazzled. (2000, p. 236)

This is a poem about a brief moment of beauty, and there is a melancholy here that always accompanies those moments (*How long have we?*). It is the line, “Time is a mountain lion,” that wounds me. It’s the ferocity of it, the understanding that something prowls always at our edges. It’s a line for lovers, who live on borrowed time. Carver, who was already dying when he wrote this, knows time is above all a predator. Barthes recognises further into *Camera Lucida* that time is *punctum*. Time does not only wound God, or the infinite – it wounds *us*. “This new *punctum*, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* (“*that-has-been*”), its pure representation” (2000, p. 96). What Barthes calls the *noeme*, “the very essence” (ibid., p.76) of a photograph is that it always proclaims “that-has-been.” Kempinski calls this photography’s “unrivalled ability to preserve and project an instance of life (thereby disrupting mortality) by attesting that ‘the body I see’ once and incontestably animated that frame” (2007, p. 460). This is what we see in Carver’s poem. We recognise that the dazzling body of the beloved both exists in this moment, and will also not always be. Perhaps we would have recognised it without the line about the mountain lion. But the line itself *punctuates* the poem. It is *punctual*, in the sense that it is both ‘on time’ and ‘to the point’. And ultimately, it wounds.

The textual equivalent of the photographic *punctum* might be Cixous’ idea of the *stigma*:

The stigma is the trace of the nail’s sting. The mark of the pointed object. The stigma is a scar that is difficult to efface. The stigma resists being worn down. The hole enters my skin. The scar adds, the stigma digs, excavates ...  
Traumatism as an opening to the future of the wound is the promise of a text.  
(2010, p. xiv)

“The nail’s sting” seems a direct reference to the crucifixion of Christ. The stigma is the mark of a pointed object, or something that *enters the skin*. In this case, if we are speaking of wounding, might we not speak of the raptor, and the way it pierces its prey? I refer to the instance in which predator and prey connect. It is a pure *moment*. Moment is movement (momentum) and the pausing of movement. Everything stops. *An opening to the future of the wound*.

Let us consider one of R.S. Thomas’s earliest raptor poems, ‘Moorland’:

It is beautiful and still;  
the air rarefied  
as the interior of a cathedral  
  
expecting a presence. It is where, also,  
the harrier occurs,  
materialising from nothing, snow –  
soft, but with claws of fire,  
quartering the bare earth  
for the prey that escapes it;  
  
hovering over the incipient  
scream, here for a moment, then  
not here, like my belief in God. (1993, p. 513)

This is an assured poem, certain in tone, clear enough in its expression. *It* – the moorland, we can suppose – *is beautiful and still*. The first line lulls the reader with its gentle consonance between the two adjectives. Even the assonance of air and rarefied does not bother us. Yet, the word *rarefied* should be enough to give us pause. It seems both correct in its rhyme, and a little bit *off*. Thomas might mean that the air is thin, since the moorland might well be high up – but this is the rarefied air of the interior of a cathedral. So it might mean ‘esoteric,’ distant from everyday concerns, or even indifferent to them. Yet, this cathedral is *expecting a presence*. The air, then, might be

rarefied because the expectation of presence leaves the cathedral holding its breath. All these possibilities crowd into the poem as we move into the second stanza.

Here in this *rarefied*, breathless, indifferent air, the harrier *occurs*. It is not necessarily the presence we are expecting, since it *also* occurs. This is not the last time we will encounter a raptor occurring, happening or materialising in Thomas's oeuvre. The use is truly curious. It does not *appear*, exactly. More, it *presents itself*, or presences itself. It comes from nothing. (Or does it come from the snow? For a moment at the end of the second stanza, we are deceived into believing so). In truth, it *befalls* and falls. It's a violent occurrence. This is the harrier in full stoop.<sup>37</sup> It comes down on its prey with such force it quarters to the earth. *Quartering*? Again, don't we have to pause here? This word is not quite right. Whether the harrier has struck the earth with its beak or its claws, the earth would not be quartered. It might be split or broken. But the quartering<sup>38</sup> of the earth requires something of a particular shape – a *cross*. What we encounter here is, again, the cross in violent motion. There is a hint, then, that this thing that materialises is also a thing of God; a hint that prepares us for the final stanza.

For now, the earth is quartered in place of "the prey that escapes." Still, the harrier remains hovering over an *incipient* scream; that is, a scream that is only just beginning. What began as a scene of tranquillity ends with this image of a hovering threat, one that occurs and then disappears. The last lines, however, are what truly pierce. They speak of the wound. The raptor is *here, for a moment, then / not here, like my belief in God*. Again, we can take this as a straightforward sentiment – the poet's belief in God is in flux, at best. Could it be read otherwise? That, the raptor is here for a moment, and then - like his belief in God – not here *at all*? The wound lies in this ambiguity. At the heart of this poem is doubt; in diction as much as in content. It sits at odds with the

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<sup>37</sup> It is possible that Thomas means to use 'quartering' in the esoteric sense, as found in hunting, of hounds ranging across territory in search of game. Perhaps the raptor never strikes at all. But most readers would not know the more obscure definition, and it is entirely typical of the punning R.S. Thomas to mean both things. The image of quartering remains, not least because the sense of violent motion – the "claws of fire", the bird that is here then not here – suggests something more than mere searching.

<sup>38</sup> It also suggests the medieval method of execution – hung, drawn and quartered – the first example of which can be found in the gruesome execution of the last Welsh prince, Dafydd ap Gruffydd. ([http://www.wired.com/science/discoveries/news/2007/10/dayintech\\_1003](http://www.wired.com/science/discoveries/news/2007/10/dayintech_1003))

certainty of tone. We might also see that, in likening the coming of belief (if it comes at all) to the stoop of the harrier, Thomas depicts these epiphanies as a kind of attack. The thing pinned to the ground, in the last, is the poet himself.<sup>39</sup>

“The murderer has been round,” writes R.S. Thomas, in *A Year in Llŷn*, “since I last visited Tŷ Mawr pool – to go by the signs, two blackheaded gulls killed by the peregrine falcon – only the wings left and the ligament linking them. Why are birds of prey so fond of the heads of their victims?” (1997, p. 114) *The murderer*, he calls the peregrine, the raptor. At the same time, to the poet, the peregrine is a beautiful killer:

In Nietzsche I read, as I have read before: it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that eternal life can be justified. I have many times felt this truth while gazing on the impersonal, pitiless beauty of nature. Consider the beauty of the birds of prey. And yet they are killers. Today I saw a stoat in Braich y Pwll, another beautiful killer, but moving so nimbly across the earth, as light as a feather.

(*ibid.*, p. 118)

Thomas has slightly misread Nietzsche (or read a mistranslation) here – the line, from *The Birth of Tragedy*, reads: “it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified” (1967, p. 52). That is, he speaks of *life*, but not eternal life. But Thomas’s reading of it stands – Nietzsche argued, ultimately, that the universe was better justified as an aesthetic, rather than a moral, phenomenon. Robert Wicks, in his book on Nietzsche, explains it thus:

The moral justification of the universe requires an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good God; the aesthetic view of the universe requires the strength to believe that the universe is innocent, as it spews out volcanic lava, disease, and floods that burn and kill innocent children. (2002, p. 119)

This is what Thomas sees when he gazes upon the “impersonal, pitiless beauty of

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<sup>39</sup> There is one other way we might approach this poem. Since the raptor has, for now, missed its prey, we could ask whether the appearance of belief for Thomas relies on whether this time a creature of God has killed its prey.

nature.” He is a priest, yes, and a poet – but also an indefatigable birdwatcher, and he can’t ignore the laws of nature he sees played out before him. Moreover, he sees in the lightness, agility and precision of a predator, a kind of real beauty. He reiterates the idea in his autobiography, *Neb*:<sup>40</sup>

The young rector would himself see the birds of prey hunting, and the weasel and the stoat going about their bloody work. And how beautiful those birds are, and how agile the small animals that hunt. Anyone who has seen a peregrine falcon falling like lightning on its prey is sure to experience a certain thrill that makes him feel quite humble. These are the masters of the world of nature. One of the unfailing rules of that world is that life has to die in the cause of life. If there is any other way on this earth, God has not seen fit to follow it. This is a doctrine that plays straight into the hands of the strong. As far as this world is concerned, Isaiah’s vision of the wolf dwelling with the lamb, and the leopard lying down with the kid, is a myth. (1997, pp. 95-96)

As if to prove this point, in the midst of working this paragraph, I walked out into my courtyard and found there a dead baby bird. It must have been tossed from its nest in the olive tree by the strong winds. A barely feathered thing, reddish, like something internal, it was covered almost entirely by ants. There was a small movement around its unfeathered wings. For a moment I thought it was being eaten alive. Life dying for the cause of life, as Thomas observed. We cannot ignore this appraisal of the predatory life-cycle when we read Thomas’s raptor poems.

Still, Thomas is rarely single-minded. We can see this in his poem, ‘Barn Owl’ – the first of what could be considered a decades-long contemplation of the raptor. Thomas divides the poem into two sections so different in form and even treatment of the subject that it is simpler to study the sections separately. Here is the first part:

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Mostly it is a pale  
face hovering in the afterdraught

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<sup>40</sup> For reasons we can only speculate, Thomas wrote *Neb* in the third person.

of the spirit, making both ends meet  
on a scream. It is the breath  
of the churchyard, the forming  
of white frost in a believer,  
when he would pray: it is soft  
feathers camouflaging a machine.

It repeats itself year  
after year in its offspring  
the staring pupils it teaches  
its music to, that is the voice  
of God in the darkness cursing himself  
fiercely for his lack of love.

(1993, p. 319)

In the first part of the poem we can see in it the bones, if not the formal characteristics, of a sonnet. Nowhere in this poem do we encounter an 'I' – it seems distant, rather neutral. In the repetition of 'It is', there is again a certain confidence, but one that is slowly undermined by the curious and confounding syntax. For all its intonation of 'It is', the images in the first part, in particular, are remarkably insubstantial. "Mostly it is ... pale," he says. It's a smudge, a blur. He continues, "a pale / face hovering in the afterdraught / of the spirit." Already we have the insubstantial, hovering in something even less substantial. *Afterdraught* is a curious word. It doesn't exist as such, though it can be found in Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem 'The Loss of the Eurydice'. There it refers to the near-drowning of 'Bristol-bred' Sydney Fletcher:

Now her afterdraught gullies him too down;  
Now he wrings for breath with the deathgush brown;  
Till a lifebelt and God's will  
Lend him a lift from the sea-swirl. (1972, p. 35)

The afterdraught, then, is a kind of turbulence that follows something in rapid motion. In the case of 'Barn Owl', it is 'the spirit' that has passed thus. Perhaps it is due to the

very presence of an owl in this poem, but I picture the motion of the spirit to be something like a raptor stooping its prey. Even so, we are not invited to stay with that image, but brought back to the hovering face – the lines, “making both ends meet / on a scream,” draw us to the beak of the owl as it cries out.<sup>41</sup>

This is a strangely indistinct image of the owl, and it becomes even more so. The breath of a churchyard is nothing at all, really (though the image again hints at spirits, since most Welsh churchyards are in fact graveyards) – and how can a creature really be “a forming of frost in a believer”? We are left with sensations – of lightness, and of cold despair. Then, we are brought back, abruptly, to the body of the owl, and its soft feathers. We cannot remain with this softness, either. The feathers, after all, camouflage a machine. The idea of the Machine (usually capitalised) in Thomas’s oeuvre generally suggests technological vanity, noise, the destruction of God.<sup>42</sup> In this case, I’m not sure that he is referring to the Machine, but recognising, instead, that beneath the softness lies an instinctive, driven creature, whose main intent, after all is not to ‘pray’, but to ‘prey’.<sup>43</sup>

The detached efficiency of the machine is evident too in the image of the owl repeating itself (one might think here of a printing press, or an assembly line) in its offspring. Thomas here recognises that this is not one barn owl, but many; that each contains something of the same thing. And each, he argues, is taught the same thing. Its music, the owl’s music, is “the voice / of God in the darkness cursing himself / fiercely for his lack of love.” This is not a singular event. Over time, through ages, God does it again and again – not loving enough, and then cursing himself for it. It’s an oddly human God, this, prone to the repeating of errors. Unless, of course, his lack of love is no error, but an inevitability.

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<sup>41</sup> There is a pun here on ‘making ends meet’ of course, that hints at an odd kind of economy (perhaps playing with afterdraught’s echoing of overdraft).

<sup>42</sup> “‘The main criticism is that the machine is dehumanising,’ commented Thomas in an interview.” (Brown, 2006, p. 76)

<sup>43</sup> There is plenty to suggest that Thomas’s use of ‘pray’ in this first part is also a pun on prey, and that the frost that forms in the believer “when he would pray” can be read either straightforwardly, or, depending on whether the he is the believer or the owl, as *a kind of coldness in believers when they pray predatorily*, or an *iciness that descends upon the believer when he thinks of how the owl would prey*, since predators, especially for Thomas, often hint at a cold ferocity at the heart of God/nature.

The first part of 'The Barn Owl', as it stands, could be a complete poem if Thomas were content to leave it. Instead, the second part complements and contradicts the first. Why keep going back to the same idea? As I have said, Thomas returns to the raptor/owl throughout decades of writing, and even, as we see here, in a single poem. If we discount the possibility that the poet has run out of ideas, then this repetition must occur because there is something in the idea that is un-retrieved and irretrievable.<sup>44</sup> It must compel the poet, it must seem essential somehow, despite the fact, or perhaps because, it cannot be retrieved.

In the second part of 'Barn Owl', the form changes distinctly.

and there the owl happens  
like white frost as  
cruel and as silent  
and the time on its  
blank face is not  
now so the dead  
have nothing to go  
by and are fast  
or slow but never punctual  
as the alarm is  
over the bleached bones  
of its night-strangled cry.  
(ibid.)

It appears as a block on the page, unpunctuated with the exception of the full stop that marks the finish of the poem. Further, it begins as if the poet is now mid-sentence. "and there the owl happens," he begins. How does a creature happen?<sup>45</sup> It *materialises*. Like white frost, he says. A phrase repeated from the first part of the

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<sup>44</sup> Damian Walford Davies suggests, "[t]hose who consider Thomas's work limited in its ploughing of narrow furrows would do well to reassess it as a great poetry of return, echo and repetition ... and, indeed of the *fear* of repetition" (2009, p. 5) .

<sup>45</sup> This, of course, echoes back to the harrier that 'occurs' in 'Moorland'. There is a shared vocabulary between all the raptor poems that strengthens the idea that these poems should be considered in conjunction with each other. See Appendix, 'The Shared Vocabulary of the Raptor Poems'

poem (these two are not so separate after all?). Again, this is a creature then that *becomes*, rather than *is*, despite the initial proclamations of 'It is.' Perhaps this makes sense, since the creature does not seem to belong to time. The owl's face (uncannily round, after all) appears to echo a clock's face. But the time on it is *not now*. What time is it, then? The answer for Thomas is *no time*, a phrase we will find in many of his later poems. It is in this place of no time that we find the dead.<sup>46</sup>

Thomas takes risks with his rhetoric, here and elsewhere. Consider the argument here – the time on the owl's blank face is not now, so the dead have nothing to go by, and are fast or slow but never punctual. It is both logical and nonsensical. Why should the dead rely on an owl to keep time for them? Then again, why should they not? What do we know of the dead? The effect, in any case, is disconcerting. We get a sense here of the dead lagging behind or waiting ahead of us, just out of time, not in the now, but not quite out of it either. Still, the sentence (this whole part is after all a single, paced sentence) continues, and it becomes even more convoluted. The dead are "never punctual / as the alarm is / over their bleached bones / of its night-strangled cry." The lines seem out of order. Out of joint, you could even say. Thomas unsettles us here. The image itself – of a shriek over bleached bones – is unsettling, but we can take no comfort from the order of syntax either.

We leap rapidly between images and ideas. Thomas is fast, as Bly noted of Tranströmer, but he is imprecise. He doesn't focus in too hard on anything here. He is too intent, instead, on keeping us on our toes. This poem seems muttered but breathless. Yet it ends on a cry. Something, in the end, alarms the poet, and the reader.

Since the owl is a predator, it is hard not to believe that it is in some way responsible for the bleached bones below it. It is also impossible to separate it from the God of the first part, who also cries out in the voice of the owl. We are left then with an image of the owl that is spectral and fierce, cold and yet distressed. This is also the image we are

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<sup>46</sup> "'Time,' I said, 'how can you experience heaven if you are conscious of time?'" wrote R.S. Thomas in his autobiography (1997, p. 116). We should recognise, then, that this experience of "no time", which is a consciousness of time, is a hellish one, for the poet.

left with of God. This poem promises, at beginning, to be instructional, but then keeps us at odds with its original premise. In fact, it seems dead set against teaching us. (For one thing, the speaker knows things about God as he knows things about owls: impossibly.) We would not be able to identify a barn owl from this poem. This then is not a poem about what is, but about what happens, as the owl happens, as God happens. It is about the effect of the brief, searing presence of God in the world.

This presence continues to trouble Thomas. He returns to it with renewed energy in *No Truce with the Furies*, in several poems that speak to one another. The Furies (or Erinyes, or Fates) are the goddess-sisters of Greek & Roman myth who punish those who have committed crimes, particularly crimes of impiety. H. J. Rose notes that they appear regularly in Homer and the literature that followed, “as terrible, but just, avengers of crime and executors of curses invoked by one wronged on those who have wronged him, but most especially on those who have violated the ties of kinship” (1997, p. 84) . The title – taken from a line of one of the poems in the collection – is once again ambiguous. It could be that the Furies offer no truce – that once a crime is committed, there is no way of avoiding punishment or fate. Alternatively, it could mean that the poet wants no truce with them – that he is in his own way furious and intransigent in the face of fate. One definition of fury, according to the OED, is “Inspired frenzy; esp. poetic ‘rage’” (p.820). As is always the case with Thomas’s ambiguities, the truth lies somewhere within all these readings. The title of this late, last collection suggests a poet still unreconciled with death, and the ferocity of God, of nature. Whatever Thomas has to say about and with the raptor, sits here, with this lack of reconciliation. He revisits the raptor twice in the single poem, ‘Bestiary’. In the section titled ‘Owl’, he writes:

The owl has the clock’s  
face but there is no time  
on it. No raptor ever  
is half-past its prey. (1995, p. 68)

This owl is the twin of the one we encountered in the earlier ‘Barn Owl’, of which Thomas writes, “and the time on its / blank face is not /now” (1993, p. 319). I have

already mentioned Thomas's repetition of the idea of 'no time'. There is an obvious pun here – one emphasised by the enjambment in the lines, "but there is no time / on it." Before we make the step to the new line, we find ourselves caught in a moment of lamentation. *But there is no time*. Damian Walford Davies recognises that, "'No time' is a phrase that fascinated Thomas" (2009, p. 169). He finds several instances of the phrase throughout Thomas's oeuvre, notably in *Echoes to the Amen*, when he writes, "What time is it? / ... It is no time / at all"; and in *Counterpoint*, in which we find, "The blood / ticked from the cross, but it was not / their time it kept. It was no / time at all" (ibid.). Here, in 'Bestiary', the expression carries both an intimation of grief at our mortality, and simultaneously, the recognition of something nonetheless immortal. After all, there is *no time on it*, this owl's face which is a clock face. It is, instead, outside time. He continues: "No raptor ever ..." As if it were not immortal after all, but entirely without existence, or yes, again, outside of existence, something other. The completion of the enjambed line, however, drags us back to this world. "No raptor ever / is half-past its prey." The line, though abstract, ultimately carries the image of the raptor in full attack. We are reminded of the earlier incarnation of the raptor – the harrier that quartered the earth with its stoop. The raptor is not half-hearted in its attack. It might miss, but it will not be from lack of interest. It might miss so hard it will quarter the very earth. In this sense, though the owl is somehow out of time, it is also *on time* – its timing, that is, is perfect. It has to be, in order to pierce its prey. Again, we find ourselves encountering that pun – the owl is *punctual*, it delivers the *punctum*. The *punctum* of this poem, perhaps of all of Thomas's poems, has something to do with intractable time.

These poems are so dense with meaning. Syntactically, they're difficult. Pikoulis, in a reading of another of Thomas's poems, 'A Species', describes the enjambment as "spectacularly ragged" and reminds us that:

Walford Davies has written of Thomas's syntax inducing 'elegant vertigo', a 'free fall' that obliges us 'to "catch" the meaning. The poem so risks its own form we have to reconstitute the idiom ... realign the syntax ...' Such garbled scraps cannot be construed until they have been realigned in a process that resembles log-rolling. They defer resolution so repeatedly that, when it comes,

it feels brittle. (2009, p. 87)

More than many other poets, Thomas is willing to risk the meaning and stability of his poems. In 'Bestiary', Thomas makes the reader chase down the meaning just as the raptor approaches its prey. There is no option but to be utterly precise. Look at the curious syntax of that last sentence: *No raptor ever is half-past its prey*. It's not easy. It's even *uneasy*. And perhaps proving Pikoulis' idea that his resolutions are at best brittle, Thomas himself ends on the word 'break':

The talons revolve  
and the beak strikes the  
twelve sharp notes that are  
neither midday nor midnight  
  
on the skull's anvil  
but links of a chain  
that thought forges and thought  
tries continually to break. (1995, p. 68)

This is a sentence you'd never hear spoken. It is labyrinthine, and he moves us mercilessly from images of the talons and beak to the sound of notes struck, to the image of the skull as anvil, and then away again, to links of a chain, which themselves are not in the end real, but an imagined chain forged by thought, and that *thought tries continually to break*. This is in no sense prosaic. "All great texts begin in this manner that *breaks*," we remember Cixous said (1993, p. 59). Here, by the time, we reach Thomas's use of the word 'break', we have indeed broken away from the idea of the owl. Again, this is not only a poem about an owl. He uses the extended metaphor of the smithy in order to show us the way thought has to be beaten into the skull's anvil, but at the same time, broken there too. The lines break, the thought breaks. Everything is dis-located.

'Dislocation' means, of course, to 'displace', as well as to wrench out of joint, and as such it points up the sense in which the dislocation of the mind ... may

be understood as the result of the violent removal of the self from its true place and the resiting of it in a bewilderingly, painful alien situation. (Thomas M.W. , 2009, p. 186)

Here is a poem about struggling in time, struggling with thought. The owl is not a metaphor for any particular thing, perhaps, but gives the poet a way into seeing the world both in and out of time. This poem even wrenches the reader out of joint, since we are both destabilised and slowed down by the turning of its lines and syntax. As M. Wynn Thomas also recognised, “Thomas’s writing is constantly destabilising itself, taking rigidity out of its firmness, and taking the simple firmness out of its affirmations” (ibid.,191). Firmness, after all, is ultimately soothing. It’s clear Thomas is not interested in soothing the reader or, indeed, himself.

This lack of stability and deliberate, irascible resistance to closure brings to mind what Edward Said called ‘Late Style’. We can find, claimed Said, in the later works of Shakespeare and Sophocles, for example, an “unearthly serenity.” They are “late in their own way, but they have settled their quarrel with time” (Wood, 2007, p. xiii). What interests Said more, are those poets, musicians and artists who instead grow more quarrelsome with time, into their late work. “But what of artistic lateness not as harmony and resolution, but intransigence, difficulty and unresolved contradiction?” (Said, 2007, p. 7) His predecessor in considering these kinds of works is the philosopher Theodor Adorno, who saw just this kind of intransigence in the late works of Beethoven:

the power of Beethoven’s late style is negative, or rather *it is negativity*: where one would expect serenity and maturity, one instead finds a bristling, difficult, and unyielding – perhaps even inhuman – challenge. “The maturity of the late works,” Adorno says, “does not resemble the kind one finds in fruit. They are ... not round, but furrowed, even ravaged. Devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny, they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation.” (ibid., p. 13)

This is not the serenity of maturity then, but the struggle of it. Faced with death, with the ravages of age, with the loss of their contemporaries and friends, these artists do

not grow quiet. Instead, they are unreconciled. "The tone of the individual cases may be tragic, comic, ironic, parodic, and much else, but every artist who is late in Said's sense of the word will be unreconciled," writes Michael Wood in his introduction to Said's book (2007, xv). If anything, over time R.S. Thomas's poetry becomes more difficult, more ambiguous. *I'm not done*, he seems to be saying. *I'm not done with you yet*. This we see here when, in 'Bestiary', Thomas revisits the raptor again at the end of the poem, in the section called 'Barn Owl'. He is not yet reconciled with what the raptor is or means. He doesn't care if he has said it before; he still hasn't quite said it right.

Here, it is the cry of the owl that arrests the poet:

The owl calls.

It is not Yeats'

owl; it moves

not in circles

but direct through

the ear to the heart,

refrigerating it.

It belongs not

to the mind's order. (1995, p. 72)

This is again the owl that pierces and freezes its prey. It is not indirect; and yet the poet speaks of it indirectly. This time he tries to speak of what it is not: not Yeats' owl (presumably, this refers to Yeats' evocation of owls in 'The Descendants': "The Primum Mobile that fashioned us / Has made the very owls in circles move");<sup>47</sup> Thomas's owl moves not in circles; it belongs not to the mind's order. What order, then, does it belong to? Again it is outside of order, of time, even place. Even when he will not say directly, these are hints that Thomas sees in the owl an aspect of God. In another of the poems from *No Truce with the Furies*, 'Raptor', he *does* say it directly. "You have

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<sup>47</sup> Yeats, W.B. (1989). *The collected works of W.B. Yeats: the poems* (R. J. Finneran, Ed.). New York: Scribner

made God small," he begins, whereas:

I think of him rather  
as an enormous owl  
abroad in the shadows,  
brushing me sometimes  
with his wing so the blood  
in my veins freezes, able

to find his way from one  
soul to another because  
he can see in the dark. (ibid., p.52)

Here, as in the 'Barn Owl' section in 'Bestiary', the raptor-God freezes its prey; a "denizen" as Thomas calls it in 'Raptor' that in most thinking this God should love. In the 'Barn Owl' of 'Bestiary', he revisits this metaphor. "As a poet," he says, "I am / dumb." This really is the unutterable, the indescribable:

; as painter

my brush would shrivel  
in its acetylene  
eyes. What, as composer,  
could I do but mimic

its deciduous notes  
flaking from it  
with a feather's softness  
but as frigidly as snow? (ibid., p.72)

This is a comfortless image; one that seems rooted in wintry old age. The notes of the owl are not evergreen, but falling like leaves, like feathers, like snow. This snow is frigid, itself a word laden with suggestions of coldness, apathy and impotence. In the

face of the cry of the owl, who is also God, the poet too finds himself mimicking these characteristics, or recognising even that his own words too are withering, in all senses of the word. This is also, however, a moment of lightness and release.

## No time at all

We find echoes, in this particular image of the falling feather, of a moment in Thomas's poignant poem, 'A Marriage.' The brief elegy is characteristically reticent, and yet it carries within it a deep tenderness:

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.

(1993, p. 533)

The poem can be found in *Mass for Hard Times*, published in 1991, the year Thomas's wife Elsi Eldridge died. The poem must have been written hard up against the deadline

for the book. In many ways it carries the same concerns we find in the later collection. Elsi's presence is everywhere in *No Truce with the Furies*. Much of Thomas's preoccupation with her death is what gives the collection its feeling of 'lateness'. This poem, and the final section of 'Bestiary', with their ultimate images of release, put me in mind of what Michael Wood describes as, "Said's evocation of Richard Strauss's late work as "radically, beautifully elaborative," as "music whose pleasures and discoveries are premised upon letting go" (2007, xvii). What might a poetry premised upon letting go look like? Thomas is anything but elaborative, and yet, it carries this particular sensation: an uncertainty and intransigence that make us grasp at things only to have them torn from our hands. We will never quite catch them. In her discussion of the Greek poet and elegist, Simonides of Keos, Anne Carson claims that to read him "is a repeated experience of loss, absence or deprivation for the reader who watches one statement or substantive after another snatched away by a negative verb, pronoun or subordinate clause" (1999, p. 101). Simonides' poetry – and the elegies of R.S. Thomas – re-enact the very loss they describe, by depriving us too of sense and stability.

This experience is repeated in the elegies to Elsi found in *No Truce with the Furies* – and none so much as the poem 'No Time':

She left me. What voice  
colder than the wind  
out of the grave said:  
'It is over'? Impalpable,  
invisible, she comes  
to me still, as she would  
do, and I at my reading.  
There is a tremor  
of light, as of a bird crossing  
the sun's path, and I look  
up in recognition  
of a presence in absence.  
Not a word, not a sound,  
as she goes her way,

but a scent lingering  
which is that of time immolating  
itself in love's fire. (1995, p. 33)

The opening lines are almost piteous. *She left me*, says the poet. The question that follows is more wondering than accusing. "What voice ... said: 'It is over'?" As in a rhetorical question, the answer is contained in the line. It's the voice of that thing or presence that is even colder than the wind out of the grave,<sup>48</sup> which we might call death itself, but which echoes, of course, the raptor-God we find elsewhere in his oeuvre; whose voice is "the breath / of the churchyard, the forming / of white frost" ('Barn Owl'), and whose "deciduous notes" fall "with a feather's softness / but as frigidly as snow" ('Bestiary'). Once again, the poet finds himself in an encounter with the icy voice of God. This is suggested too, when he follows the question with a description of something "impalpable" and "invisible," characteristic of the untouchable, unseen god – though the words work doubly hard, since we soon realise they describes also the 'she' who comes to him still. He recognises her presence "in absence," in the tremor of light, as of the shadow of a bird as it crosses in front of the sun. He is left (in more than one sense) with the "scent lingering" (this is a lovely use of syntax, since the word itself lingers like a scent at the end of the line), *which is that of time immolating itself in love's fire*. To immolate oneself is to sacrifice oneself. We have already seen a kind of sacrifice in Thomas's poems, but in that case, the infinite was sacrificed in order for time (and by extension, life) to exist. This is a powerful reversal, then. Here we see that after death, time in turn sacrifices itself back, to – or because of - love. There is the image here of a bird crossing the sun's path, and yet, when we reach this last line, it is possible to imagine, that the bird, in the end, did not cross the sun, but disappeared into its fire.

The title here carries much of what we can find in the poem. We could say that this poem is called 'No Time' because time has at last immolated itself, or concur with

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<sup>48</sup> There are echoes here of one of the Welsh names for an easterly wind: "called 'gwynt traed y meirw,' (the wind blowing over the feet of the corpses,) because it blew towards the foot of the graves in the churchyards" Traditionally, graves are oriented in Wales with headstones at the west end of the graveyard. Sikes, W. (1880). *British Goblins: Welsh Folk-lore, Fairy Mythology, Legends and Traditions*. Published online, December 20, 2010 [EBook #34704]. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/34704/34704-h/34704-h.htm>

Walford Davies, who says that, “here, the title articulates both a cry of despair at the brevity of life and the miracle of that moment when ‘time immolate[s] / itself in love’s fire’” (2009, p. 169). We could also argue that the phrase ‘No Time’ is simply a kind of euphemism for eternity. And yet, it is more than that, because it contains this word, ‘No.’<sup>49</sup> In her discussion of the ‘economics of negation,’ Anne Carson notes that the word ‘nothing’, “lends itself to scary word play, to unanswerable puns, to the sort of reasoning that turns inside out when you stare at it” (1999, p. 100). This happens too when we pair ‘no’ with something else, as R.S. Thomas does throughout his work. But Carson sees more than just word play here:

The poet’s control of time is a power vested in negativity. Once we have invented time, and we have, we can only escape it by refusing to know what time it is. An early painting of Cezanne’s called *The Black Clock* is a painting of a clock with a face but no hands, a picture of timelessness. A clock without hands designates no particular time and all possible times at the same time ... To refuse to know what time it is, is an almost godlike gesture. (ibid., p. 105)

Can’t this be seen here, and in the other intractable, late poems of R.S. Thomas? In the way he gives us, too, the image of the blank face in the predator-God? The poet at once ascribes this refusal of, or exile from, time to God. Yet he also enacts this refusal: in his repeated use of ‘no time’, his evocation of eternity, the way he turns his back on time, without truce. When is the poet a predator, we might ask again. *When he makes godlike gestures.*

But there is another pun here, almost lost in the elegy. “Impalpable,/ invisible she comes / to me still ...” Again, this is a punning about time and motion. She is both still beside him, without motion – and still coming to him; that is, “without change, interruption or cessation; continually, constantly; invariably; always” (OED, p.2128). Moving towards him always, and yet doing so without moving. This is entirely possible, since she stands outside of time. This is also another moment in which Thomas uses one word to signal a kind of connection between this poem and another – as if chiming

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<sup>49</sup> It is perhaps a stretch too far, but we can even hear another kind of cry in the title, that of: ‘No, Time’ – a plea for time to stop running its course at least for a while.

a single bell here sets another to ringing elsewhere. The way these words ‘ring a bell’ for us strengthens the ties between certain poems of this collection – all of them, in some way, a raptor poem. Although the link is quiet in ‘No Time’, its title, its use of cold imagery, and this single word, ‘still’, keep it connected. Only a few pages before ‘No Time’ we find another elegy, called, of course, ‘Still’:

You waited with impatience  
each year for the autumn migration.  
It happened and was over.

Your turn then. You departed,  
not southward into the burnished  
and sunlit country, but out

into the dark, where there are  
no poles, no accommodating  
horizons. Last night, as I loitered

where your small bones had their nest,  
the owl blew away from your stone cross  
softly as down from a thistle-head. I wondered. (1995, p. 27)

Here, the pun comes into its own. Why the title? Already we have seen how the word carries more than one meaning, how it situates the subject both in and out of time. We see it too in this poem. The first stanza is deeply a part of time. The autumn migration punctuates the years, and she waits with impatience, caught in time, but strains a little against its limits, as we all do. The poet – brusque as time itself – acknowledges, it *happened and was over*. So, this is life, he seems to shrug. That’s that. Yet, the poem turns as the stanza turns, as life turns when it is *her turn*. Then we find that she has departed for a place without the very limits she’d set herself against; a place without poles or horizon. It sounds bleak enough, pitted as it is against the *burnished and sunlit country*, and yet for Thomas, the “accommodating horizon” is not always as wonderful as it might seem.

In an early poem, 'The Untamed', Thomas draws a distinction between 'his' garden, which is "the wild / Sea of the grass" and 'her' – presumably Elsi's – garden, which "shelters between walls," where there is peace "of a kind, / Though not the deep peace / Of wild places." Though he sometimes walks with her, "Following strait paths / Between flowers" (strait not straight), the silence there:

Holds with its gloved hand  
The wild hawk of the mind.

But not for long, windows,  
Opening in the trees  
Call the mind back  
To its true eyrie; I stoop  
Here only in play. (1993, p. 140)

This distinction rankles a little; the lazy division of domestic female and wild male lacks the sophistication of his later thought. The word *stoop* is, of course, a pun, since the stoop is the action of a hawk in freefall towards its prey. Yet the sense of condescension in the word lingers, and taints the poem. In *No Truce with the Furies*, we re-encounter the idea of the domestic, only now it is God that is the untamed. "You have made God small," he begins in the poem 'Raptor', that same poem in which he insists, "I think of him rather / as an enormous owl" (1995, p. 52). A transformation has occurred, too, in the way he regards his wife. Instead of a gardener, keeper of the domestic, we see instead a recurrent comparison to the birds he so loved. After all, it is she, who "in life / had done everything / with a bird's grace" (1993, p. 533) – but it is in the *afterlife* that she becomes truly wild to him. In this sense, it is perhaps not so bitter that she has fled those accommodating horizons. Walford Davies claims that the "the tonal quality of the final two words of 'Still', one of the late, plangent elegies," is "[c]aught between scepticism and astonishment ..." (2009, p. 169). For here we find that the raptor – that presencing of God in the predator – is perhaps also the presencing of his beloved. This is 'still' as interjection. Probably that was just an owl, he says. But, still ...

“In the Meridian speech,” writes Anne Carson, “Celan talks about the motions of poetic language as if they were pendular: ‘The poem holds its own on its own margin. In order to endure it constantly calls out and pulls itself back from an “already no more” into a “still here”’” (1999, p. 95).<sup>50</sup> This is what ‘Still’ does – moves us back and forth between grief for the ‘already no more’, and wonder (I think Thomas meant more than one thing when he wrote ‘I wondered’) at the ‘still here.’ This is another kind of small leap, a leap that can keep us for a time elevated, suspended, in the area between those two states: grief and wonder; scepticism – as Walford Davies would have it – and astonishment. The ‘already no more’ of Celan’s essay holds the same court as Barthe’s ‘that-has-been’, and suggests that there is a kind of ringing rejoinder to the wound of the *punctum*. In the very act of writing poetry, of creating, there is also something that staunchly declares itself ‘still here’. The reader moves between these two poles; remaining on the margin, for as long as they remain with the poem, or it with them.

Of the poem, Jacques Derrida said: “It is a body, yes, thus there is love and violence there” (2005, p. 168) . We have already said something of violence and the wound. What, then, of love? Damian Walford Davies makes the argument that Thomas’s love poems and elegies “should be recognised as a distinct and distinguished category of the later work” (2009, p. 5). Perhaps unintentionally, his point may be that they belong to the *same* category. It is love – a certain tenderness – that allows for the leap we see in the late poems of Thomas. “[L]oving is wanting,” writes Cixous:

and being able to eat up and yet to stop at the boundary. And there, at the tiniest beat between springing and stopping, in rushes fear. The spring is already in mid-air. The heart stops. The heart takes off again. Everything in love is oriented toward this absorption. At the same time real love is a don’t-touch, yet still an almost-touching. *Tact itself: a phantom touching*.

(2010, p. 124)(her emphasis)

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<sup>50</sup> This is Carson’s own translation. John Felstiner translates it thus: “the poem holds on at the edge of itself; so as to exist, it ceaselessly hauls itself from its Now-no-more back into its Ever-yet” (Celan, 2001, p. 409) .

It is the reaching towards the beloved – the leap towards – and the ‘tactfulness’ at the same time, of choosing not to consume her, that creates the suspended, pendular motion of the late poems. This is the leap that springs into mid-air; that approaches but barely touches. It’s the movement towards, light enough not to crush.

This phantom touching – this tactility, this tactfulness – exists elsewhere, not only in the encounter between lovers, but in the tenderness of many kinds of encounters. In his essay, ‘A Counter-Desecration Phrasebook,’ Robert Macfarlane speaks of a certain kind of tact: “Tact, as due attention, as a tenderness of encounter, as rightful tactility” (2010, p. 127). Why this word, ‘tact’? For MacFarlane, tact offers an approach to speaking of the natural landscape. His concern is with the language of landscape, that we have lost a certain precision in speaking of landscape that means also losing a connection to it. Language and the world are intertwined, he argues. He draws our attention to the etymology of tact – its origins in the Latin *tangere*, ‘touch’ – ; that it concerns not only a certain lightness of touch, a *tenderness of encounter*, but also *due attention*, since tact also means a “keen faculty of perception or discrimination” (ibid.). Real love, says Cixous, is an almost-touching. MacFarlane sees the same thing – only for him, it is a kind of love of the world that demands our tact.

The encounters both writers speak of strike me as *poetic encounters*, the kind that we recall finding in Berger’s ‘metaphoric relationship’. These encounters are predicated on the existence of an abyss between the subjects, and at the same time, a willingness, even desire, to cross the abyss. In an essay on R.S. Thomas, Calvin Bedient notes his “magnificent talent for metaphor” (1990, p. 206). He continues:

Clean-edged, hard, bright, Thomas’s tropes are an enameller’s art. They are all firmness, there is never any smear. Yet they are resplendent with the light of actual things; the world seems to press itself into them. What is more, for all their tidiness, they have an acrobat’s daring. Their forms start from as far away as they can and still meet in the centre without strain. Little miracles of implosion, they hurl two particles of the world so hard upon each other that, for the imagination, they become one. Yet the meeting appears as gentle as the

sudden, balance-defying close of a butterfly's wings. (ibid., pp.207-8)

These "little miracles of implosion" have the same lightness of touch we see in the "phantom touching" of Cixous. Indeed, Bedient goes on to argue that metaphors "are the love forms have for one another" (ibid.,208). But *are* metaphors love? His metaphor stretches the metaphor. It is imprecise, the opposite of what he celebrates in the work of Thomas. Yet, intuitively, there is something right about the phrase. Since metaphor is about a daring approach, about tactful precision, it seems that even if it is not "the love forms have for another", it at least occupies similar terrain.

Thomas's masterful use of "clean-edged, hard, bright," metaphor is evident in one last raptor poem – 'The Indians and the Elephant', also found in *No Truce with the Furies*:

'It is like a tree,'  
the blind Indian cried  
encountering the beast's trunk.  
'Like a rope, I would say,'  
cried another, discovering  
its tail. I, though I am  
not blind, feel my way  
about God, exploring him  
in darkness. Sometimes he is  
a wind, carrying me off;  
sometimes a fire devouring  
me. Rarely, too rarely  
he is a scent of a great flower  
I lean over and fall  
into. But always he surrounds  
me, mostly as a cloud  
lowering, but one through which  
suddenly light will strike,  
burnishing the cross  
waiting on me with spread wings

like the fiercest of raptors. (1995, p. 48)

Here, the imagery does much of the poetic work; it begins with language so unadorned as to read like prose. Yet, as the poet expands on his experiences of God, the pacing too increases and the metaphors become richer, more frequent. Look at how the final few lines quicken with the sudden introduction of infinitive verbs – *lowering*, *burnishing*, *waiting* – at the beginnings of the lines. The poem begins with a kind of illustration of a point: we are blind to the wholeness of the deity, and we recognise – or misrecognise – only parts of an intangible, infinite God. As Christopher Morgan says, there is an increasing sense then of “a deity that is without boundary and beyond control” (2009, p. 117); he is carried off, devoured, falling, and *always surrounded*. And, “[j]ust as the poem appears to peak in an image of encompassment by the lowering cloud,” writes Morgan:

Thomas draws out of it, in quick succession, three sharply focused snapshots: the sudden, striking light, the burnished cross, the fiercest of raptors. Viewed in slow motion as it were, we can visualise the emergence of these images, the light descending from the lowering cloud, which in turn illuminates the cross in its flash, revealing not the suffering Christ but the hunting bird of prey. Despite this motion in time, the effect is one of simultaneity in which the strike of light is itself the strike of the ‘waiting’ raptor. (ibid., pp.117-118)

It is indeed the simultaneity that arrests us in this moment. The light and raptor strike as one; and the cross and the raptor are one. It is simultaneity too, or perhaps synchronicity, that what we have here is a *snapshot of something in violent movement* – just the thing that Tranströmer intuited in ‘In the Open’. We have come full circle, only now, here, at last, the cross and the raptor are the same thing. The movement of these metaphors are indeed “little miracles of implosion”, and, at the same time, precise as a snapshot.

## To undo the creature in us

To test the amplitude of time beyond human scale, creatures are enlisted as emissaries of the senses. At high altitude, ocean depths, or close to the earth, they enact modes of attention. If anthropomorphism interprets the world in human terms, we can with patience arrive at its inversion: not humanising but creaturely. (Johnston, 2009, p. 12)

How is the poet a predator? “Writing is the movement to return to where we haven’t been ‘in person’ but only in wounded flesh, in frightened animal, movement to go farther than far, and also, effort to *go too far*, to where I’m afraid to go” (Cixous, 2010, p. 97). To enter the frightened animal is always a violent action, but also a risky one. We are afraid, we might go too far. We might go so far as to go into death. In her 1944 essay, ‘Feeling and Precision’, Marianne Moore writes:

Wallace Stevens, referring to poetry under the metaphor of the lion says, “It can kill a man.” Yet the lion’s leap would be mitigated almost to harmlessness if the lion were clawless, so precision is both impact and exactitude, as with surgery; and also in music, the conductor’s signal, as I am reminded by a friend, which “begins far back of the beat, so that you don’t see when the down beat comes. To have started such a long distance ahead makes it possible to be exact.” (1987, p. 396)

*Poetry might kill.* In the work of R.S. Thomas this is what the raptor does, and what poetry might do. It goes so far into death it quarters the earth. It takes the leap. “When one has no thread and cannot go by land, one goes by air. This is what poets do” (Cixous, 2010, p. 139) But how? It has to come from far back, suggests Moore. If we can think, even, on Thomas’s actual leap out of the graveyard, there is a sense that whatever motivated it came from far back. Did he know what the gesture meant? I doubt it. Still, I wonder about the feeling in the man’s chest, an intensifying pressure that led to the gesture. “The great griefs come to us disguised, long after, as ghosts, when we believe them far removed, it is then they come, slip, unrecognisable, anguishing, in incomprehensible forms, changed into vertigo, into chest pains” (ibid., p.93). Whatever these great griefs are for Thomas – and I suspect they are plural: his longing for language, his sense of exile in his own homeland, the loss of beloveds – it is these that push against the ribs and that, I believe, form the impetus for the leap.

We sense this rising tension in his poetry too. Christopher Morgan writes of R.S.

Thomas:

The reader experiences not so much a clear vision along revealed lines, as in some 'confessional' verse, but the sensation of a leashed, subterranean grief, its continually rising pressure, a simultaneous capping of that pressure, and, as a result, a tightly controlled poetic atmosphere often electric with plangency. (2009, p. 7)

He is a reticent poet, and indeed, rarely confessional. It is what is coming from far back, then, that galvanises and electrifies his work. It is not enough, however, simply to have a grief. There is also the question of how the poet controls it. It does not work as we might imagine. Robert MacFarlane, in speaking of Marianne Moore's essay, points out:

Precision, in Moore's account, is a kind of testimony or bearing witness, which is quite different to rational understanding. It involves not probing for answers, but watching and waiting. And precision, for Moore, is best enabled by metaphor: another reminder that metaphor is not just something that adorns thought, but that it is, substantively, thought itself. (2010, p. 126)

This is not about pouncing, just yet. There is a first step, in which we must wait and watch. When Moore spoke of Stevens' lion, she was referring to his poem, 'Poetry is a Destructive Force'. "It is a thing to have, / A lion, an ox in his breast, / To feel it breathing there," writes Stevens. And yet, the poem ends in a curious fashion:

He is like a man  
In the body of a violent beast.  
Its muscles are his own . . .

The lion sleeps in the sun.  
Its nose is on its paws.

It can kill a man. (1990, p. 192)

The poet and the predator are one, the man's body also the body of a violent beast, *its muscles are his own*. Yet, the poem does not close with violence. It closes with potential. The lion sleeps, nose on paws. It can kill a man, yes. But right now, it rests. How is the predator a poet? It *waits*.

"Poems do not make appointments with their subjects," Jane Hirshfield writes:

– they stalk them, keeping their distance, looking slightly off to one side. And when at last the leap comes, it is most often also from the side, the rear, an overhead perch; from some word-bind woven of brush or shadow or fire. Why do circuitousness and indirection play so great a role in poetic thought? One hint lies in the very metaphor of hunting: only when looked at from a place of asideness and exile does the life of the world step fully forward. There is a shyness at the core of existence, a hesitance to be seen. Even domestic animals do not like having their picture taken. By removing the self from the landscape through silence and stillness that lead to concentration – the watcher begins to perceive "from the point of view of the animal," as José Ortega y Gasset wrote in his *Meditations on Hunting*. It is an essential alteration. When we begin to see the landscape as the animals see it, undistorted by clamorous self-assertion a widened constellation of being emerges to graze and root and swim.

(1997, pp. 107-8)

This approach to poetry, then, requires us not to *know*, or *do*, but to wait to the side. This is the leap not only into metaphor, but into poetic subject. There is much in common here with Keats' notion of negative capability, as explained in his letter of December, 1817: "it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously--I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason."<sup>51</sup> Though he doesn't say it, perhaps Keats too perceived the shyness at the core of existence: that to reach too fast

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<sup>51</sup> <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/cs6/keatsltr.html>

for an answer will simply scare it away.

Somehow, the poet needs to combine a fine use of precise language with this kind of indirection. It seems an impossible task. Yet this is at the centre of most metaphoric language. Metaphor, after all, is not direct. If we think, for example, of the shift of imagery in Tranströmer's poem, 'In the Open', in which the man crouching in a field is caught, "for a fraction of a second," in the cross of a plane's shadow; and the moment is followed, without explanation, without an irritant reaching after fact or reason, by the image of the cross hanging in the vaults of the church, "like a snapshot of something in violent movement" (2006, p. 94). There is nothing imprecise about the language, or indeed the images, but the way they are brought together demands a lateral movement – a leap – that leads us to kinds of meanings we could not be brought to directly. For one thing, the meanings here are multiple, as we have already seen. It is worth revisiting what MacFarlane said of Moore's ideas of metaphor: that it is "not just something that adorns thought, but that it is, substantively, thought itself" (126). There is an unmaking and remaking of thought here. That is, thought itself is often indirect, and yet not imprecise. Poetic thought, in particular, allows for a kind of reorganisation of mind that is both radical and also, we might say, a kind of grace.

Hirshfield's prescription for stalking the poetic subject is to remove the self from the landscape "through silence and stillness that lead to concentration." This is the retreat of the lion, head on paws. Anne Carson points out that Simone Weil had a similar program "for getting out of the way":

"The self," she [Weil] says in one of her notebooks, "is only a shadow projected by sin and error which blocks God's light and which I take for a Being." She had a program for getting out of the way which she called "decreation." This word is a neologism to which she did not give an exact definition nor a consistent spelling. "To undo the creature in us" is one of the ways she describes the aim.

(2006, p. 167)

Carson refers here to a passage from Weil's book *Gravity and Grace*, in which Weil writes, "May that which is low in us go downwards so that what is high can go

upwards. For we are wrong side upward. We are born thus. To re-establish order is to undo the creature in us" (2009, p. 34). This movement is the same movement I see in Moore's essay; of beginning far back in order to make a leap. What does Weil mean – to undo the creature in us? We might think again of Celan's use of the phrase 'still here'. It is, after all, a question of *stillness* of approach. In the Meridian speech, he declares, "This Ever-yet [or as Carson translates it, 'still here'] of poems can only be found in a poem by someone who does not forget that he speaks from the angle of inclination of his very being, his creatureliness" (2001, p. 409) Weil claims we are wrong side upward, and Celan, that we suffer from an *angle of inclination* of our very being; and both recognise this aspect of the self as *creaturely*.<sup>52</sup>

We encounter a kind of counteraction to this aspect of self – we might call it an undoing of the creaturely - in R.S. Thomas's poem, 'A Thicket in Lleyn.' "I was no tree walking. / I was still," he begins. The poet goes on to describe encountering, in the thicket, migrating birds that "re-leafed / the trees":

... They filtered through  
the boughs like sunlight,  
looked at me from three feet  
off, their eyes blackberry bright,  
not seeing me, not detaching me  
from the withies, where I was  
caged and they free. (1993, p. 511)

The poem opens with an odd image of stillness. *No tree walking*. Though there are clear Biblical (and perhaps Shakespearean) references here,<sup>53</sup> it is the image itself that arrests. Trees do not walk; though at least once, in Welsh legend, they did so – when

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<sup>52</sup> We might also say that it is an indicator of 'lateness' - Edward Said draws our attention to E.M. Forster's description of the poet Cavafy as "standing motionless at a slight angle to the universe", which for Said, "captures the strange, ecstatic effect of his always-late style, with its scrupulous, small-scale declarations, which seem coaxed out of a pervasive obscurity." (2007, p. 147)

<sup>53</sup> See Mark 8:24, in which a blind man healed by Christ declares, "I see men as trees, walking." There are also echoes in the opening line of Macbeth, Act V, Scene V, in which the soldiers of the English army, who each carry a branch from Birnam Wood, advance upon MacBeth's castle, giving the appearance of a "moving grove."

Gwydion enlisted trees to aid him in the battle of C  d Goddeu.<sup>54</sup> It is possible that Thomas also nods in the direction of the myth, and the opening lines place us in the territory of the mythical, but also present us with an immediate syntactical ambiguity, through Thomas’s use, again, of *no*. I was no tree, he might be saying, and I was walking. That is, he is differentiated from nature, his surroundings, by the fact of his walking. Perhaps we can read it straight: “I was no tree walking.” It seems he clarifies when he continues to say, “I was still.” But we have seen already how this word carries with it more than one connotation, of both motionlessness and continuity. What the opening suggests, then, is that the poet here is already in a place not quite *in time*, a place where man and tree can be confused. And yet we see, that, although the birds do not seem to be able to separate him from the withies (branches) around him, he sees for himself that he is caged and they free. He is, after all, no tree. In what way is he caged? J.A. Baker, who was obsessed with chasing the peregrine, in *becoming peregrine*, wrote that, like all human beings, “I seem to walk within a hoop of red-hot iron, a hundred yards across, that sears away all life. When I stand still, it cools and slowly disappears” (2005, p. 185).<sup>55</sup> This is as Berger also sees it: the animal scrutinises us across an abyss of non-comprehension. In zoos, for example, the purpose:

is to offer visitors the opportunity of looking at animals. Yet nowhere in a zoo can a stranger encounter the look of an animal. At the most, the animals gaze flickers and passes on. They look sideways. They look blindly beyond.

(2002, p. 273)

The animals seem to sense our very difference. For Thomas, here, it is this sense of not belonging, of being other, that leaves him caged, as much as it is an effect of finding himself in the crossed shadows of the tree branches. In his discussion of ideas of the creaturely, Eric Santner makes it clear that the creaturely is not the same as the animal. In fact, he writes, if anything, “only animals that have been ‘deterritorialised,’ removed from their natural habitat, become creatures in the sense I have been

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<sup>54</sup> The poem ‘C  d Goddeu’ can be found in Robert Graves’ *The White Goddess* (1975, pp. 30-36). The book offers a detailed examination and explanation of the mythical imagery of the poem.

<sup>55</sup> We might remember it was Baker who recognised the way the wild bird sees in us a caged creature, when he wrote of how the peregrine above him “came lower, turning his head from side to side, bewildered, curious. He was like a wild hawk fluttering miserably above the cage of a tame one.” (2005, p. 145)

elaborating.” What he calls “creaturely life,” then, “does indeed mark our resemblance to animals, but precisely to animals who have themselves been thrown off the rails of their nature”(144). It is in the caged animal that we see for ourselves our creaturely state. The theorist Anat Pick, who has also elaborated on the term, argues that the creaturely:

includes both human and nonhuman life. Creatureliness is intended to replace the so-called human condition, which implies the “inhuman condition” as somehow inferior and excluded from life’s existential adventure and, most significantly, excludes animals from the moral community. The creaturely is primarily the condition of exposure and finitude that affects all living bodies whatever they are.<sup>56</sup>

We might say then that the state of being creaturely is equally found in the caged animal, and in the human who is ‘exposed’ to unanswerable power, and to the finitude of existence. Pick’s point, indeed, is that mutual ground is powerlessness. In Thomas’s poem, he experiences a brush with infinity, one that serves to highlight his own finitude. The birds depart, leaving the poet to reflect on the answer:

to a question I had not asked.  
‘A repetition in time of the eternal  
I AM.’ Say it. Don’t be shy.  
Escape from the mortal cage  
in thought. Your migrations will never  
be over. Between two truths  
there is only the mind to fly with.  
Navigate by such stars as are not  
leaves falling from life’s  
deciduous tree, but spray from the fountain  
of the imagination, endlessly  
replenishing itself out of its own waters. (1993, p. 511)

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<sup>56</sup> (<http://www.cupblog.org/?p=4001>)

Here, Thomas paraphrases a passage from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, in which he declares, "The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a representation in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM" (1975, p. 167). Here, then, Thomas seems to have found a way of escaping the "mortal cage": in *thought*, or imagination. "Say it. Don't be shy," he says, as much to himself as anyone else. "Your migrations," he continues, "will never be over" – again, it seems he speaks to himself. He is offering himself a prescription for leaping – and it involves imagination, since only the mind can fly between two truths. To which two truths does he refer? Perhaps he means that any time we are faced with dichotomies, differences, and there is only one way to move between them. We might remember, also, Celan's declaration about the poem: that in order to endure, "it constantly calls out and pulls itself back from an 'already no more' into a 'still here'" (Carson, 1999, p. 95). We might think of time and mortality – since, after all, it is a *mortal* cage in which we find ourselves. The poetic imagination, then, would be a tool for finding a way, if only briefly, of eluding time and finitude.

Much of the poem's density is in its final lines, in which, as a further directive, the poet advises us (or himself) to navigate by "such stars as are not / leaves falling from life's / deciduous tree," but rather those that are "spray from the fountain / of the imagination, endlessly / replenishing itself out of its own waters." Coleridge, in talking of imagination, discussed also the idea of 'fancy', which he considered the imagination's inferior, since, unlike the imagination, which "dissolves, diffuses, dissipate, in order to re-create" and is "essentially *vital*", fancy "has no counters to play with but fixities and definites" (1975, p.167). Thomas seems to echo this difference, since he argues that the stars the poet navigates by – the guiding principle, if you will – should not be as dead as falling leaves, but as vital as an endlessly replenishing fountain, which is, of course, the fountain of *imagination*.

Thomas was so moved by this encounter with the goldcrests in the thicket on Pen Llŷn, he wrote of it again in prose, with almost the same title, this time as a contribution to Paul Wakefield's *Britain: A World by Itself*. Here we find a greater elaboration on the thought behind the poem:

Had that infinite I announced itself in a thicket in Lleyn, in the serenity of the autumn sunlight, in the small birds that had taken possession of it, and in the reflection of this human being? And had the I in me joined seemingly unconsciously in that announcement; and is that what eternity is? And was the mind that returned to itself but finite mind? There was something missing from all this. It was too like talk of the minute drop returning to the boundless ocean. Such an interpretation smacked too much of the endlessly repeating life-cycle ... Life is not I; is certainly not God ... Life feeds on life, and has an unconscious, inscrutable, repetitive quality. What talons and beaks were not in waiting for the goldcrests on their way south ...? (1998, pp. 96-101)

This, then, was not about becoming one with God, as it were. Thomas, ultimately, was too preoccupied with what he described in his autobiography as “the problem of killing as part of the economy of the God of love” (1997, p. 107). He continues the essay ‘A Thicket in Lleyn’:

No, while the experience lasted, I was absent or in abeyance. It was when I returned to myself that I realised I was other, more than the experience, able to stand back and comprehend it by means of the imagination, and so by this act of creation to recognise myself not as lived by, but as part of the infinite I AM.” (1998, p. 101)

He sees himself, once he has returned to himself, as *other* than God, but he has also found a way of participating in the *act of creation*, and as such, also sees at last that while he is not one with God, he can at least touch the infinite from time to time, and that it is imagination that offers such brief moments of grace. What is not given much weight, here, is the role his *noticing* has played in also reaching this epiphany. “Life,” he says, “feeds on life, and has an unconscious, inscrutable, repetitive quality.” Then he turns from the thought. Yet, I believe such recognition is essential to finding a way to make the leap. It is almost certain that Thomas would have known the passage from St Paul, in which he declares, “For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now” (Romans 8:22). This passage, indeed this whole letter from St Paul, has been essential for many thinkers grappling with ideas of the

creaturely. It attends to the way the creature, *all of creation*, is exposed to, and suffers at the hands of, power it cannot grapple with, or comprehend. *Life feeds on life*. Yet, there must be some way of escaping it, of escaping the mortal cage. Santner, in looking at Alain Badiou's treatment of this passage, notes that what is at stake, "in the Pauline notion of resurrection, of the overcoming of death, is ... not some phantasmal reanimation of the dead but the possibility of a deanimation of the undeadness that makes creatures of us all" (2006, p. 129). Thomas has recognised in his essay that natural life has an *unconscious, inscrutable, repetitive quality*. For Santner, this quality, we have already seen, can be found in the animal that has been "thrown off the rails" of its nature. He cites an example from W.G. Sebald's novel, *Austerlitz*,<sup>57</sup> in which he "remembers above all a remarkable display of repetition compulsion by a raccoon" (ibid, p.144). The extract describes how the raccoon, encaged in the nocturama of the Antwerp zoo,

sat beside a little stream with a serious expression on its face, washing the same piece of apple over and over again, as if it hoped all this washing, which went far beyond any reasonable thoroughness, would help it to escape the unreal world in which it had arrived, so to speak, through no fault of its own.

(2002, p. 6)

It is this kind of repetitive, inscrutable, unconscious motion that Thomas has recognised in the goings on of the natural world, and he finds himself at odds with it, since he too, *we too*, seem to have arrived in such a world through no fault of our own. There is something more here, however. As Santner points out, Sebald further recalls:

that several of the animals in the exhibition "had strikingly large eyes, and the fixed, inquiring gaze found in certain painters and philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us purely by means of looking and

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<sup>57</sup> Extraordinarily, since these kinds of reverberations seem to keep occurring in this essay, it is Austerlitz who later tells of visiting the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, and observing there the pitiful animals in their enclosures. His companion, Marie, makes a statement Austerlitz claims never to have forgotten: "she said that captive animals and we ourselves, their human counterparts, view one another *à travers une brèche d'incompréhension*" (Sebald, 2002, pp. 368-9). In typical Sebaldian fashion, he has taken the words of another author and placed them in the mouth of his own character. This is a simple translation of Berger's assertion that the animal scrutinises us "across a narrow abyss of non-comprehension" (2002, p. 260).

thinking.” The text includes photographs of two pairs of animal eyes – apparently *of different kinds of owls* – and two pairs of human eyes, one of which is immediately recognisable as belonging to Ludwig Wittgenstein.

(2006, p. 144)(emphasis mine)

Here, again, I am astonished to find the owl. Only this time, the owl offers us a way to think about *looking*. We could say that Thomas, in his essay on the thicket in Lleyn, is seeking a way of penetrating the darkness which surrounds us, and that ultimately, he is arguing that we must do so *purely by means of looking and thinking*. There are, however, *ways* of looking. Christopher Morgan notices something essential to Thomas’s essay:

The thicket here is alive: nervous, sighing, and eventually still. In response to that uneasiness we find the poet patiently turning aside, approaching warily, waiting, tuning, all, for Thomas, essential preliminaries, preparations, ready-making for the possibility, in time, of the eternal I AM. (2009, p. 63)

Hirshfield has already said, “only when looked at from a place of asideness and exile does the life of the world step fully forward.” It is only when we alter our way of seeing, when we begin to look from the side, that we can begin to see like an animal. Remember the rest of Hirshfield’s declaration:

By removing the self from the landscape through silence and stillness that lead to concentration – the watcher begins to perceive “from the point of view of the animal,” as José Ortega y Gasset wrote in his *Meditations on Hunting*. It is an essential alteration. (1997, p. 108)

Why essential? It offers us a way of looking at ourselves as animals look at us, of seeing ourselves as creatures. Remember Celan’s argument, that a poet should be someone “who does not forget that he speaks from the angle of inclination of his very being, his creatureliness” (2001, p. 409). Eric Santner has recognised that, “Celan is very likely alluding here to Benjamin’s remarks about the bent backs – the constitutive cringe – of so many of Kafka’s figures” (2006, p. 36). The angle of inclination, that is, is a creaturely



Figure 4: Detail from the Isenheim Altarpiece

cringe, a bodily amplification of the soul-response of a creature subjected to overwhelming power. He draws our attention to the work of Matthias Grünewald, the same artist in whom John Berger discovered the spectacular image of a de-feathered Christ. As if there were not enough intertwining, W.G. Sebald opened his first book of poems, *After Nature*, with a consideration of Grünewald. Here, as Santner notes:

one even finds a variation on the cringe that Benjamin identified as the signature posture of Kafka's creatures ... : a "panic-stricken / kink in the neck ... exposing the throat, and often turning / the face towards a blinding light." This, Sebald writes,

is the extreme response of our bodies  
to the absence of balance in nature  
which blindly makes one experiment after another  
and like a senseless botcher  
undoes the thing it has only just achieved." (2003, p. 98)

Does this not sound like the God of R.S. Thomas? A deity who somehow allows the death of beauty, the ruin of love? A deity who is capable of great grace, but who will also descend upon his denizens like a pitiless raptor in stoop? What body wouldn't cringe in response? Yet, this cringe is also the prelude to escape, since it is only when we find ourselves at an angle to the world that we might see it, and ourselves, obliquely. Joan Adkins, in her consideration of Thomas's work, notes a correspondence between Thomas and the German mystic, Meister Eckhart. She draws our attention to a particular passage from Eckhart in which he writes:

Now, I might ask, how stands it with the soul that it is lost to God? Does the soul find herself or not? To this I will answer as it appears to me, that the soul

finds herself in the point where every rational being understands itself with itself. Although it sinks in the eternity of the divine essence, yet it can never reach the ground. Therefore God has left a little point wherein the soul turns back upon itself and finds itself, and knows itself to be a creature. (1990, p. 249)

Here again, we encounter the soul turning at angles to itself in order to *know itself to be a creature*. In the same way, claims Adkins, Thomas “finds, through the writing of poetry, ‘a little point’, and thus creates from the luminous instant of reality the character of eternity” (ibid.). The little point, she continues, must “touch things into life” (ibid., p.250). To do so, it demands that the poet combine vivid perception with deep concern; but above all, she says, it demands precision. “If the poet is to see things as they really are,” she writes, “and be precise about them, he must also be precise about the feelings which attach him to them” (ibid., p.251). It is not enough to see the world precisely, but to understand deeply what meaning it has for you. Thomas’s biographer, Byron Rogers, seems to have recognised this when he wrote that some of the poems “are startlingly honest, if oblique, so the effect ... is of a man looking life straight in the face out of the corners of his eyes” (2006, p. 22). We might even recognise here, that this is the manner in which a peregrine, or other raptor, stalks its prey. Calvino, in talking of lightness, makes note of the legend of Perseus, who killed Medusa by intelligence and indirection. But Calvino is clear on one thing: “Perseus’s strength always lies in a refusal to look directly, but not in a refusal of the reality in which he is fated to live; he carries the reality with him and accepts it as his particular burden” (2009, p. 5). There is no room for vagueness or dishonesty in this approach; we have to turn to this little point in order to know ourselves as creature, and begin the leap that might touch things into life.

What constitutes this little point, of which Eckhart speaks? What little point could be enough to make the soul turn back on itself, to recognise its own creatureliness? What could be so precise, and so deep? What might it look like, in a poem? Adkins claims that since the demand is that we see the little point, that point itself must be the eye. This might make sense, in terms of *point of view*. Yet this seems like a partial truth. The answer must be right there, in the phrase itself: *little point*. We might turn instead to

the etymology of *point*; it comes to us via the French, but originates in the Latin word *punctum*, that past participle of *pungere*, to pierce, to prick (OED, p.1615). To find the little point, we go into wounded flesh. We enter, that is, via the *punctum*. After all, as Eric Santner recognises, “the *punctum* functions ..., we might say, as a tiny condensation of what Celan called the “angle of inclination” of creaturely life” (2006, p. 155) If we turn back on ourselves, if we view ourselves from this angle of inclination, what we will see ultimately is our woundedness. This cannot happen within the imprecise. The little point, the *punctum*, is a vector. It is this point of piercing, this woundedness, that will ultimately lift us out of ourselves. It is the crux of the leap. In poetry, this must take the form of a moment that *touches us into life*, galvanises us against inertia, *moves us*.

We have always been concerned here with time. *Punctum*, after all, is a time-wound. Or it is the acknowledgement of the time-wound. In seeing the time-inflicted wound, we also in our own way disrupt time. What we are talking about here, after all, is poetic epiphany. The poet Czeslaw Milosz explains, to his understanding, that epiphany:

is an unveiling of reality. What in Greek was called *epiphaneia* meant the appearance, the arrival, of a divinity among mortals or its recognition under the familiar shape of man or woman. Epiphany thus interrupts the everyday flow of time and enters as one privileged moment when we intuitively grasp a deeper, more essential reality hidden in things or persons. (1996, p. 3)

It as if for a moment the sacred flares up. The eternal disrupts us, and points us to our own mortality. Of course, this is why late works are so open to epiphany. The poets of late works are already keeping a weather-eye on time. The epiphany is both the descent of the infinite, the divine, into the mortal world, but also the lever that allows the poet, and reader, to leap, if only briefly, out of that world. “A lever. We lower what we want to lift,” claims the philosopher Simone Weil (2009, p. 92). But she has on her mind a very particular lever: “The cross as balance, as lever. A going down, the condition of rising up. Heaven coming down to earth raises the earth to heaven” (ibid.). Weil was a mystic, she saw in all things questions of gravity and grace:

When the whole universe weighs upon us there is no other counterweight possible but God himself ... Evil is infinite in the sense of being indefinite: matter, space, time. Nothing can overcome this kind of infinity except the true infinity. That is why on the balance of the cross a body which was frail and light but which was God, lifted up the whole world. 'Give me a point of leverage and I will lift up the whole world.' This point of leverage is the cross. There can be no other. It has to be at the intersection of the world and that which is not the world. The cross is this intersection. (ibid., p.93)

The cross, after all, is a vector, it's the point of true wounding; it is, as I have already said, the site of the finite crucifying the infinite. Whether or not we accept the Christian story of crucifixion and resurrection, the intuitive truth of the story remains. In poetry we might find these moments of woundedness, the *punctum*; of the clash of time-bound humanity with the unboundedness of time. A kind of violence is the impetus, *punctum* is the impetus, it's what sets the leap into action, it's the little wound drilled down and down, deep as a grave, deeper. The poet Geoffrey Hill saw just such a moment of leverage in Thomas's work:

I think here particularly of the way he can appear, through management of metre combined with syntax and phrase-rhythm, to run a poem down into a condition of inertia – an effect, however, that does not diminish the final impression of something essential being positively *struck*. In its fine balance between exhaustion and resolution it is a significant technical discovery and an appropriate example of Thomas's mastery of the medium. The 'Archimedean point' to which Kierkegaard alludes in the *Journals* is the hypothetical station from which it would be possible to move the earth. For the poet, the Archimedean point has to be not imaginary or hypothetical but actual, perhaps some arbitrariness of rhythm or syntax – more even than of image – which establishes beyond question the alienness of the poetic statement, its refusal of, even its obliviousness to, such matters as finding answers to 'the great questions of life'. (2009, p. 56)

This seems to sit at odds with the idea of epiphany. After all, we think of epiphanies as finding answers. I wonder if it is so simple. Do the gods descend to earth in order to answer questions? Rarely. Instead they come to disrupt our lives, to perhaps turn our gaze back to wonder. Hill describes Thomas's poetry as run down into a condition of inertia, but at the same time giving the impression *of something essential being positively struck*. There is indeed mastery here. Hill sees that the *Archimedean point*, what we might also call the 'little point', the vector, the *punctum*, is not always found in image, but in the curiosities of syntax or rhythm that brings to light how the poetic statement *refuses to find answers*. We have seen this everywhere in Thomas's late work, which we might remember is riddled with *intransigence, difficulty and unresolved contradiction*. But Hill, perhaps with a fellow poet's insight, saw this even in Thomas's earlier work.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, for me, in some ways it feels like R.S. Thomas has always inhabited his lateness, that it simply deepened with old age.

I would like to turn in the last to one final elegy to Elsi, in which we might see if we can follow Hill's argument. The deceptively simple 'Comparisons' does indeed seem to wind down into itself:

To all light things  
I compared her, to  
a snowflake, a feather.

I remember she rested  
at the dance on my  
arm, as a bird

on its nest lest  
the eggs break, lest  
she lean too heavily

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<sup>58</sup> Hill draws our attention to Thomas's poem, 'That', from the 1968 collection *Not That He Brought Flowers*, which ends with the lines; "The shadow of the tree falls / On our acres like a crucifixion, With a bird singing in the branches / What its shrill species has always sung, / Hammering its notes home / One by one into our brief flesh" (1993, p. 206).

on our love. Snow  
melts, feathers  
are blown away;

I have let  
her ashes down  
in me like an anchor. (2004, p. 345)

There is lightness everywhere here. Even the lines break before they can become weighed down, and the stanzas rest on one another without compression. There are quiet consonances across the poem, as with the rhyme of rested, nest and lest / lest ; but nothing heavy-handed. This is no booming, stentorinous proclamation of grief. It opens with a clear, unembellished statement of comparison. She was to him light, as snow is, or a feather. “I remember she rested,” he begins the second stanza. Already the poem comes to a visual rest. Though they are at a dance, the prevailing image is of the bird on its nest. He takes a risk, of course, with repetition of the word *lest*, ending the first two lines with it. But the overall effect is of a murmuring repetition of a sound of grief, like *alas*; aided by the association we carry with the word *lest*, as part of the phrase *Lest we forget*. For once the poet even dares to say the word, ‘love’, but it is blown away swiftly, as feathers are.

Were the poem to omit the last stanza, we’d have a serviceable elegy at best. Most of the work, then, is done in the final lines: “I have let / her ashes down / in me like an anchor.” It promises, at the first line break, to continue the ephemeral imagery – we imagine that he will let go of something, something to complement the melting snow and blown feathers. Instead we are made to work for our conclusion, if indeed there is one. There is, of course, an obvious pun at work here. *I have let her ashes down* carries a striking image of ashes trailing from the hand, but this is also a lament that reverberates back through the poem. There is a sense that the poet sees now that some disservice has been done. *I have let her ... down*. The phrase carries the burden of a lifetime of things half-done, half-seen, or half-said. At the very least, it suggests that the poet’s perception of his wife as a *light thing* is inadequate.

Of course, the pun is only half the phrase. Thomas quite literally anchors the elegy with this last stanza. Against all the lightness, there is this one image: the ashes, let impossibly down inside the poet, like an anchor. We not only move down, but turn our focus from the external world to the poet's dark interior. The image works to draw our attention to what she is now, physically, to him: a weight in the gut, a knot in the soul. It gives us a corporeal knowledge of how grief feels. Tony Brown claims that all the ambivalences of the poem "resolve into the unambiguous solidity of that final image" (2006, p. 105). Yet, I find the image, though certainly of a solid object, entirely ambiguous. What does he mean that the ashes have been lowered into him like an anchor? It is an active statement – he has let them down, not they have been let down into him. There is an element of choice, perhaps of deliberate self-castigation. Perhaps it is a kind of homage, a way of keeping her. After all, isn't an anchor cast in order to hold us steady against the tide? He has found a way to hold her – she who was always barely there – only it is in death itself (indeed, because of death) that this is possible. There is even another potential pun here, if we accept the older, religious definition of *anchor*, as an archaic version of the word *anchorite*: a recluse, or hermit. We could read it thus, then: I have let her ashes down in me, like an anchor, or hermit, would - an image that does not in fact sit at odds with the sudden inward turn of the poem.

This final stanza, then, opens us up again to the entire poem. For me, it is its *punctum*, its wound. The mourning rings through these lines. It also functions as its Archimedean point, since it launches us into an arena of unresolved contradiction, and thereby keeps the poem alive for as long, at least, as we are forced to wonder at it. "The leap is away from thought and into structure, which is technique weighing and moving imagination's density – the poet's equivalent of the Archimedean point," writes Geoffrey Hill (2009, p. 55). It is, after all, Thomas's concision, his dexterity with syntax – the structural elements of this poem, and others – that creates such richness of meaning, and that ultimately *moves* us, in all possible senses of the word.

## It is not that he leapt: he vaulted

He was this odd mixture. He was quite capable of leaving grieving families at the graveside, and vaulting the wall to go home. Yet he had a tender side to him. He called once, and my small son asked if he wanted some whisky. He poured out some squash and R.S. very gravely took it.

Christine Evans, in Byron Rogers' *The Man Who Went into the West*<sup>59</sup>

I would like to return to the initial image that spurred this essay: the “sudden agile leap” of the philosopher Guido Cavalcanti, who placed a hand on a tombstone, and escaped the men who had surrounded and mocked him. Calvino describes this leap as that of, “the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world, showing that *with all his gravity he has the secret of lightness*” (2009, p. 12)(my emphasis). There is a – perhaps inadvertent – pun here that allows us to speak of what propels the philosopher into his leap – the hand on the *grave*. The counterweight to the leap has to be the grave, as it is in the stories of both Cavalcanti and R.S. Thomas. Calvino uses the example of the philosopher Cavalcanti to illustrate the point that “thoughtful lightness can make frivolity seem dull and heavy”( *ibid.*, p.10). When Calvino speaks of *all his gravity*, he can of course mean both that the philosopher is grave in temperament, and that he is simply engaged with gravity, held to the world, as we all are.

Of course what we have here – and I suspect is not incidental – is also an actual grave. We have already seen that in order to undertake the poetic leap, there is a need to withdraw deeply into the self, or indeed to move the self out of the way. What is as deep as the grave? Down there, six feet down or more, there is nothing left to encounter but death, and roots. It is what we must push against, lean into, in order to lever ourselves briefly over the grave. How does a poet do this? We might look to Galway Kinnell's poem, ‘The Man in the Chair’, in which he describes passing a room in which a man – there is the suggestion it is his father – sits motionless. The poet sees in the man a kind of tension, some kind of movement, perhaps even “the jerk of a leg, as if a hand / just then reached through the floor / and tried to grab it” (2001, p. 160). It's almost enough to provoke him to speak to the man, but the narrator finds that neither he nor the man have any way of bringing themselves to speak. Instead he retreats to his room, and there sits and writes:

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<sup>59</sup> (Rogers, 2006, p. 240)

I wrote, and as I did I allowed  
to be audible in the room only  
the scritch of the pen nib, a sound  
like a rat crawling around in the dark  
interior of a wall, making a nest of shreds.

All other sounds, including  
the words I never said to him,  
the cries to him I did not make, I forced down  
through the paper, the desk, the floor,  
the surface of the earth, the roof  
of that dismal region where they stood,  
two or three of them who had reached up  
and had him by the foot, and were pulling hard. (ibid., p.161)

It is a curious idea, to send words burrowing underground. It seems a way of burying them even deeper; and this from a man who “had a human / version of the pip, the disease that thickens birds’ / vocal cords and throttles their song” (ibid., p.160). In other words, it is no kind of solution – if, indeed, this is a poem in search of one. Yet, the words and cries, in their descent, do encounter something of a clue. They encounter ‘them’. But who are the ‘they’ who hold the father by the foot? What do they want? They are as mysterious as the ‘them’ in that journal entry we have already seen from Kafka: “Escaped them. Some kind of nimble jump” (Calasso, 2005, p. 126). Only this man hasn’t escaped them: ‘they’ have him by the foot. There is, of course, here an intimation of the father’s mortality. Since ‘they’ are underground, we are likely to assume they are dead; and that they draw him nearer, with a kind of insistence.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps they are his ‘demons’. What interests me here, however, is the passage of words. Of course, when we write we press undeniably downward.<sup>61</sup> Yet, what use are

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<sup>60</sup> In fact, it’s possible to read back into the poem the idea that while the poet has been at his words in his room, the father, whom he saw jerk in some kind of odd way only moments before, was, in fact, in the throes of death.

<sup>61</sup> We have encountered a similar image in the introduction to this essay, in Gregory Orr’s brief poem, ‘Silence’, in which words sink “into the deep snow of the page.” (Bly, 1975, p. 114)

words that go ever downward, unless, at the same time, they release something?

In Kinnell's poem, the words do not get a chance to work their release. 'They' still hold at the foot of his father. I am reminded of that formula of Tomas Tranströmer: the poet who travels with his image, as both eagle and mole. We have looked at how the poet might send an idea eagling overhead, but we shouldn't overlook the simultaneous tunnelling of the mole. "I myself am a valley, like my poem," declares the poet Yang Lian. "Or like a river. The movement goes down. Every poet is an archaeologist of now. The layers of this time are within the moment of where we are" (Sinclair, 2010, p. 23). *The movement goes down*. It is let down inside us. Tunnelling like words might, like the mole at work. We have seen this already – in R.S. Thomas's 'Comparisons', when he lets the ashes of his wife down in himself, like an anchor. No. Let's veer from that image for a moment.

In W.G. Sebald's novel, *Austerlitz*, the title character finds himself in an increasing state of agitation, as he tries to comprehend the revelation of his own history as an exiled Jewish child, sent away from Krakow on the *kindertransport* and raised by a grim priest and his wife, in a small parish in Wales. He has been a scholar his whole adult life, but finds himself unable to write. "Soon," he says:

I could not even venture on the first step. Like a tightrope walker who has forgotten how to put one foot in front of the other, all I felt was the swaying of the precarious structure on which I stood, stricken with terror at the realisation that the ends of the balancing pole gleaming far out on the edges of my field of vision were no longer my guiding lights, as before, but malignant enticements to me to cast myself into the depths. (2002, p. 173)

His condition only worsens until he cannot read a single word, and finds the very letters on a page abhorrent:

One evening, said Austerlitz, I gathered up all my papers, bundled or loose, my notepads and exercise books, my files and lecture notes, anything with my writing on it, and carried the entire collection out of the house to the far end of

the garden, where I threw it on the compost heap and buried it under layers of rotted leaves and spadefuls of earth. For several weeks afterwards, while I turned out the rooms of my house and repainted the floors and walls, I did think I felt some relief from the burden weighing down my life ... (ibid., p.176)

The relief is not long-lasting for Austerlitz, but it is the gesture that should interest us here. Austerlitz's condition is one of unbearable lightness; he lives as if he hovers over an abyss. Yet, he describes it also as a burden. The lightness is *literally* unbearable: it cannot be carried. I think the gesture we might expect here would be the burning of papers. Austerlitz instead sends his words into the ground, as if they might root there, or anchor him." Most literature," John Berger notes, "has been made by the disinherited or the exiled. Both states fix the attention upon experience and thus on the need to redeem it from oblivion, to hold it tight in the dark" (2002, p. 515). The son in Kinnell's poem is in some way disinherited, unable to reach his father. It is not surprising that his words, sent tunnelling, encounter some creatures holding tight at the father's feet. There is in there a kind of dreaming, or wish, as there is in Austerlitz's burying of his papers, or in the pressing down of a hand on a grave, in order to achieve another, more anchored, kind of lightness.

We can't assume, after all, that the ground is stable beneath us. R.S. Thomas certainly did not. "The ground moves under our feet; / our one attitude is vertigo," he writes in 'The Lost' (2004, p. 79), of the experience of being born Welsh. "For most of us Wales was a journey into exile we were born with," claims the Welsh poet, Tony Conran (Rogers, 2006, p. 179). Exiles know best of all that the ground is not what it seems. They see how we are, in fact, unsettled. Thus, when Thomas writes, in his elegy to his first wife, that he has let her ashes down in him like an anchor, there is also the knowledge that, against all the unbearable lightness of not-quite-belonging, there is at least one thing that might hold him in place. Still, the anchor is also made of ash. It's a complex image. Ashes are far less permanent than we might ultimately wish, even as they are at the same time all that remains, distilled to something we can hold in the hand. Damian Walford Davies points us to the work of Ben Astley, who recognised that in Thomas's late work, the "'ambiguous or unstable diction' and his delight in thwarting 'grammatical expectations' have the effect of wresting meaning 'away from

the grounding centre” (2009, p. 151). In discussing Derrida’s work, *Cinders*,<sup>62</sup> Lukacher writes, “[t]hinking and poetic naming lead us only so far on a cinder path, for cinders cool and fall to ash and the path leads no further” (1991, pp. 1-2). I wonder, then, whether the effect of Thomas’s unpredictable diction and syntax is slightly different – that it rather draws our attention to the very lack of that “grounding centre.” Even when the movement goes down, as Yang Lian said, into that thing which should be most solid to us – the ground, the depth of the self – the contradictions and ambiguity of Thomas’s poems leave us, in the end, ungrounded. The ashes are let down, but there is nowhere for them to arrive.

We might remember that image of Herzog’s, of birds emerging from deep down, where gravity is. There is an intuitive understanding here, of what it takes to rise. The leap is not, however, only a question of propelling and finding ourselves in flight. There is also this question of arrival. In poetry, our arrival is not a safe one. Cixous, in her profound consideration of the work of Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector, writes:

She makes a return journey to our concrete origins, though the journey is a spiritual one. *The journey is spiritual* because it is not enough to put one’s foot on the ground to come back to earth. It is an extremely difficult spiritual exercise, reintegrating the earthly, the earth and the earth’s composition in one’s body, imagination, thought. Clarice does not do this simply: she proceeds by feeling her way, by desiring; she moves blindly, since she is an explorer in the domain, methodically, making mistakes. Sometimes she opens the wrong door, makes the wrong manoeuvre; sometimes she gets very close to matter, to earth – she’s almost there – then she takes a step too many and breaks through the earth, passes to the other side, and comes back ...

(1993, p. 150)

Lispector is clearly a writer who has undertaken the leap, but there is here the real conundrum of arriving. It is not easy to return to the ground, not least because the ground does not seem to work as we had hoped. We can overshoot it, and send ourselves and our words under the earth’s crust. This seems like a fantasy, a metaphor

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<sup>62</sup> The word, *cendre*, in French, means equally cinders or ash.

at best. Yet, it holds a truth for the poet. When we write, we leave the ground. It is hard work – we have seen how hard it is. In leaving the earth, I would say, an alteration occurs. Our journey above and below earth changes the way we see it, we take on the panoramic perspective of the eagle, and the intimacy of the mole snuffling underground. In landing, or attempting land, then, we find that we have shifted the very ground. Any good poem, I mean to say, tracks a change. It unhomes us and gives us home. Things are not as they were. “If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry,” wrote Emily Dickinson (Grabher, Hagenbuchle, & Miller, 1999, p. 283). If you arrive on safe, familiar ground, perhaps you never took off. Why write a poem that returns the reader to herself, unaltered? As Cixous declared, it is *an extremely difficult spiritual exercise, reintegrating the earthly*. But why spiritual?

Simone Weil had some very specific ideas about gravity. “Two forces,” she said, “rule the universe: light and gravity” (2009, p. 1). For Weil, gravity is *base*, and she means to pun on the word. It is the root of things, but it is also corrupt. And so we must find a way of descending that both engages with and defies gravity. Here are her aphorisms on the matter:

To come down by a movement in which gravity plays no part ... Gravity makes things come down, wings make them rise: what wings raised to the second power can make things come down without weight.

Creation is composed of the descending movement of gravity, the ascending movement of grace and the descending movement of the second degree of grace.

Grace is the law of descending movement. (ibid.,p. 4)

When Calvino wrote of the leap, he made an additional declaration. Guido Cavalcanti’s leap over the grave was the epitome of perfect lightness. But, he says later, lightness “for me goes with precision and determination, not with vagueness and the haphazard. Paul Valéry said: “Il faut être léger comme l’oiseau, et non comme la plume” (One should be light like a bird, and not like a feather)” (2009, p. 16). We might

say here then, that for both Weil and Calvino, the creative leap demands an engagement with the very gravity it attempts to defy. What is the difference between the lightness of a bird, and that of a feather? Calvino points us to its precision and determination. I would add that, ultimately, the bird's lightness is that of the creature that *carries the burden of itself within itself*. It is spiritually demanding for a poet to attain such lightness. It demands that we know and carry ourselves as mortal, as creatures. This, we might recall, is where Perseus found his strength: "he carries the reality with him and accepts it as his particular burden" (ibid., p.5). He is light like a bird *because* he never forgets to keep a hold on the grave; just as Cavalcanti, *with all his gravity*, holds the secret of lightness. What is the source of their lightness? We should not forget that Perseus carries death in his hand, in the guise of the head of Medusa, and that Cavalcanti pushes off death itself when he makes his leap over the grave.

It is not by chance, I think now, that in tracing the leap in the work of R.S. Thomas, I have found myself writing about his elegies. The only thing more grave than an elegy might be an epitaph; and many of his elegiac poems could function as epitaphs too. But the strength of an elegy is not simply its engagement with death. It also requires of the poet a certain tenderness. This is what Christine Evans saw in R.S. Thomas, the man, when he "very gravely" took a glass of squash from her young son, and pretended it was a glass of whisky. Tenderness, after all, is also about a certain gravity of approach. The French word for lightness, *légèreté*, also means levity. It is a *thoughtful* lightness. It is a surprise, perhaps, to find that what is required, in the last, is a sense of humour. Yet, that's what we see when Cavalcanti leaps the grave. He makes a quip at the expense of his tormentors; he says, "Gentlemen, in your own house you may say whatever you like to me" (Boccaccio, 2003, p. 468), then "vaults<sup>63</sup> over the top" of the grave. His comment implies, ultimately, that their "own house" is the graveyard, since they are, in their uncouthness, "worse off than the dead" (ibid). There is gentle humour, too, in the priest who allows a small child to think he believes his glass of squash is in fact whisky. Levity, humour, is about *reaching beyond the grave* – and I mean to pun here. The tenderness of the elegies – since one root of the word is the Latin *tendere*, 'to reach' – also lies in this kind of reach. "Apart from reassembling by metaphor," writes John Berger:

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<sup>63</sup> I like that, in English, the word *vault* is in itself a pun of sorts, since a vault is both a leap and a grave.

poetry reunites by its *reach*. It equates the reach of a feeling with the reach of the universe; after a certain point the type of extremity involved becomes unimportant and all that matters is its degree; by their degree alone extremities are joined. (2002, p. 451)

We see again and again in Thomas's work that the reach is toward a possible or impossible immortality, something other than the deep weight of the tombstone. It is a risk, a casting of self towards something unknown. The poet takes the risk, ultimately, as a gesture of love. He is no idiot. He knows he won't reach the dead, or that the dead, his beloved, will necessarily reach eternity. It's a kind of leap of faith – maybe the best kind.

Perhaps, when R.S. Thomas leapt the graveyard wall on Pen Llŷn, in order to escape his mourning parishioners, this was not the best kind of leap. He was a deeply imperfect man. There is no record of how Thomas himself felt about his escape. There is, however an echo of the moment found in one of his collections published ten years after his retirement – and therefore, at least a decade after he had executed the leap from the graveyard. In 1988, R.S. Thomas published *The Echoes Return Slow*, a collection widely recognised as autobiographical (a “spiritual autobiography”, M. Wynn Thomas called it),<sup>64</sup> and unusual in form, since it played off passages of poetry against passages of prose. He describes a moment very early in his life as a priest:

So he was ordained to conduct death, its shabby orchestra of sniffs and tears;  
the Church renowned for its pianissimo in brash scores. At the funeral of the  
collier's child, when his eye should have been on the book, he saw, with raised  
eyes, the wild drake mallard winging skyward to disappear into a neutral sky.

(2004, p. 19)

There is no small amount of self-castigation here. It is clear the young priest finds himself and the church utterly ill-equipped to deal with mourning. He does not conduct funerals, he suggests, but *death*. It is a shabby orchestra, he conducts; one at

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<sup>64</sup> (Thomas M. , 2009, p. 184)

once ineffectual, slapdash and extravagant. It is less clear whether the final sentence still holds that sense of self-loathing. John Pikoulis, in his consideration of the passage, seems, at first, to think so. “‘Neutral’,” he writes, “makes such cold sentiments colder ... though the casual reader might be forgiven for thinking that the drake mallard’s flight represented the flight of the child’s soul to heaven” (2009, p. 105). Then, he seems to consider the bird again. “In fact,” he continues, “it is our friend the windhover again – nature’s bird rejecting the spurious consolations of faith” (ibid.). The windhover to which Pikoulis refers is Gerald Manley Hopkins’ bird from his poem of the same name, a complex sonnet about a kind of kestrel, but dedicated by the priest to “Christ, Our Lord.” Pikoulis asks, “but who ever thought a bird of prey swooping on its victim was a suitable image for the operations of grace?” (ibid., p.93) The answer, of course, is that R.S. Thomas thought it, and so did Gerald Manley Hopkins. Hopkins’ poem on the windhover is an achievement of observation of a raptor’s movement in the air:

how the bird how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing  
In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,  
As a skate’s heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding  
Rebuffed the big wind. (1972, p. 30)

This is the bird in full possession of itself. Perhaps in this sense, we can see why it may contain in itself a kind of grace. It does not deny what it is, a created being, a predator; and its beauty lies entirely in its utter ownership of its wildness. Hopkins describes seeing the raptor in descent: “the fire that breaks from thee then” – a fire, he seems to say, that does not astonish, exactly, since even the turned earth can shine:

No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion  
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,  
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermilion. (ibid.)

Even here, then, we find the leap; the eye and heart follow the kestrel to the ploughed earth, the dark embers – and even here, we are left with something afire with grace.

There is no doubt that Thomas knew Hopkins' poem. The two men shared too much physical and poetic territory – Hopkins wrote 'The Windhover' in North Wales in 1878. John Pikoulis says that, just as in Hopkins' sonnet, Thomas, in *The Echoes Return Slow*, sets the mallard's "naturalness" against the shabby funeral service. Wildness is everything. It holds grace, it offers escape. J.A. Baker, in his pursuit of the peregrine falcon, wrote:

I have always longed to be a part of the outward life, to be out there at the edge of things, to let the human taint wash away in emptiness and silence as the fox sloughs his smell into the cold unworldliness of water; to return to the town as a stranger. (2005, p. 10)

Yes, there is here an element of misanthropy, as no doubt there was in the gesture by Thomas. Still, when Thomas brings us into the moment of the collier's child's funeral, we notice that the priest, rather than casting his eyes down to the book, sees *with raised eyes*. This is the stance of a man caught for a moment in wonder. What he sees, and follows, is the wild drake mallard *winging skyward to disappear into a neutral sky*. Neutral is not exactly cold, unless it is like the "cold unworldliness" of Baker's water. Nature is neutral, even when God is in attendance. To desire to escape alongside nature means you desire also to cast off the world. This is what the young priest did, for a moment; and what the old, retired priest, saw in himself, whether he liked it or not. Christopher Morgan says of the collection *The Echoes Return Slow*, that Thomas "repeatedly exhibits a kind of dual compulsion toward the exploration and masking of wounds, towards a kind of nakedness and vulnerability on the one hand and towards armour and concealment on the other" (2009, p. 7). He turns to the wound, a wound he may have inflicted himself, and then he turns away. Even so, he speaks of it. There is no excusing himself here, just as he never found an excuse for a God that might descend on us as much with ferocity as with love. Jane Hirshfield says a person "may learn it from his or her own life, or possibly from reading, but an essential part of a poet's ripening into tenderness entails not excusing himself anymore" (Hirshfield, 1997, p.168). You might call it carrying the burden of yourself.

The bird, in the end, is not a metaphor. It's just a bird. The mallard's flight away from

the funeral is a natural gesture, nothing more. The gesture of following the bird, with the eyes, or with the body, in a leap away from the world, is something else. It is complex and creative and cruel and oddly tender. We would forgive the mallard its flight. I don't know, in the end, whether the poet is allowed the same forgiveness. I'll admit to a bias – but I certainly hope so.

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## On Homing

There was an unholy impetus in his falling, as though he had been hurled from the sky. It was hard to believe, afterwards, that it had happened at all. The best stoops are always like that, and they often miss.

J. A. Baker, *The Peregrine*<sup>65</sup>

In Raymond Carver's poem 'Migration', a man we imagine to be Carver visits a friend who has been given the news that he has only weeks to live. They settle down to watch a documentary on migration. I say settle, but the friend is distinctly unsettled. He watches the documentary standing up. Across the screen come "[r]eindeer, polar bears, fish, waterfowl, / butterflies and more" (2000, p.188). The poet asks after his friend:

Was he feeling okay? He felt fine. He just couldn't  
seem to stay still, was all. Something came into his eyes  
and went away again. "What in hell are they talking about?"  
he wanted to know. But didn't wait for an answer. (ibid.)

This is not how the poem ends (though it could be). I'll get back to that. For now, I'm thinking about those migrating animals. I came to my work wanting to find out something about how to get home, how to know when I was *at* home. Is it like this for everyone? I thought that the animals might lead me there. There's something both biological and intuitive in their ability to home. And yet, when it came to writing of animals, I found that they did not behave as I had hoped. They were unhappily ensnared or slippery and fleet; they foundered, or quietly slunk away. *What in the hell are they talking about?* I thought I knew.<sup>66</sup>

I look at them now and it seems so many of these poems could be called elegies – more than I'd like. We might ask, what is an elegy for? It's a way of holding. And of naming that which can't be held. This is what R.S. Thomas manages to do in his

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<sup>65</sup> p.107

<sup>66</sup> There is a sense here of the French idea of *dépaysement*, which we might roughly translate as 'disorientation', or even 'un-homing', and which speaks of the deep sense of discomfort and confusion we feel when we are away from home. It is not, however, 'homesickness', since the discomfort is not necessarily one of longing for home. <http://oxforddictionaries.com/translate/french-english/d%C3%A9paysement>

economical lines, “I have let her ashes down / in me like an anchor.” He manages to hold something of his late wife, and also speak the grief of having to let her go.

I see now there were so many things I too was trying to grasp, to *hold*. An elegy is a way of gathering in the traces.

“To grieve what is not yet / gone? I have no word / for that.” This is how I open the poem ‘deep down is as distant ...’ It was true in the moment of the poem, and it still holds true. And yet, there are *words* for it. Freud’s *vorgeschmack der trauer*, ‘foretaste of mourning’<sup>67</sup>, for example, speaks of this feeling – though this is not a single word. Sometimes we ask too much of the language we are given. We could say this is one of the tasks of poetry – to give sense to those things that cannot be spoken in a single word.

We have, too, at our disposal, other languages. What of *hiraeth*? A Welsh word – one of the few to ever make its way into the English-speaking world, because it says something this ‘thin language’<sup>68</sup> cannot – that has its roots in *hir*, ‘long’. *Hir* appears in *hirwyntog*: ‘long-winded’; and *hirddisgwylidig*: ‘long-awaited’. We might have to translate *hiraeth*, then, as ‘longing’.<sup>69</sup> “Longing,” Robert Hass wrote, “we say because desire is full / of endless distances” (1979, p.4). This Welsh way of longing is also full of distances. It’s the kind of longing you can feel even when you still have the thing you know you will lose. The Welsh, for example, might miss home at home. Perhaps the Welsh tone is an elegiac one. Elegies, of course, are written from the longest of distances, the threshold you cannot cross. They are necessarily *longing*.

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<sup>67</sup> I am indebted to Dr Susan Ash for directing me to Freud’s phrasing of this condition.

<sup>68</sup> A Welsh term for English – one that is not necessarily pejorative, but which speaks of the inherent difference in producing sounds in each language. D. Parry-Jones describes it thus: “One of the difficulties of course, and one of the first, would be to adjust the mouth, and all the parts and organs that go to the production of sound, to the lighter, milder and thinner words of the new tongue, so much so that we still call it by the name our grand or great-grandfathers gave it on the first encounter yr iaith fain (the thin language).” <http://welshjournals.llgc.org.uk/browse/viewpage/llgc-id:1277425/llgc-id:1284831/llgc-id:1284922/getText>

<sup>69</sup> The online Welsh – English dictionary of University of Wales (Trinity Saint David), to which I owe the definitions above, translates *hiraeth* variously as “homesickness,” “grief or sadness after the lost or departed,” “longing,” “yearning,” “nostalgia,” “wistfulness,” and “earnest desire.” *Hiraeth* is not so much untranslatable as indefinable. As we might say also of all our longings. <http://www.geiriadur.net/index.php?page=ateb&term=hiraeth&direction=we&type=all&whichpart=exact>

Why might the animal also bring about this elegiac tone? It comes, at least in part, because of that “narrow abyss of non-comprehension,” as Berger had it, between the human and animal. In my poem, ‘meadows empty of him, animal eyes, impersonal as glass’, it is the fox that appears and reappears, and then eludes any kind of grasping. ‘meadows ...’ presents itself as a series of aubades. An aubade is a kind of morning song,<sup>70</sup> but it may as well be a ‘mourning song’, since it is traditionally a verse that inhabits the moment when lovers part at daybreak. Aubades, we could say, are written from the stance of the foretaste of mourning. In this smallest of leavings, there is the hint of a more final departure. This threshold zone<sup>71</sup> between night and day, between leaving, and being not-quite-ready to leave, exists in the same territory as Celan’s idea of the poem that moves between ‘already no more’ and the ‘still here’.

Aubades, then, are elegiac in tone, if not in form. “An aubade,” claims the poet Tarfia Faizullah, “is a lonely poem, one written from a place of isolated longing, of marked solitude away from the beloved, whatever or whomever that figure may be.”<sup>72</sup> What is the fox doing in my aubades then? Of all the creatures, the fox is one that will both boldly enter our territory and yet, also, flee “the human taint”<sup>73</sup> as soon as it scents us. The fox is a threshold animal, just as the aubade is a threshold poem. In the first part of ‘meadows’, the encounter with the fox is woven in language that slips; meanings double back on each other, moving as the fox does, in and out of sight and knowing. It points to that which we cannot ultimately hold. The ‘it’ in the first part is not always a clear referent. This is how it should be. There’s a mingling between observer and observed, and the natural world in which the encounter takes place. But that mingling is also, ultimately, broken. The fox shakes off the moment, and disappears.

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<sup>70</sup> Aubades are most often written in the voice of the lover who leaves, and in this sense, ‘meadows...’ is not a true series of aubades. The one who is left also speaks. I could say, here, the aubade too is translated, loosened from its ground. It is not always a simple question, after all, to ask who or what fled from whom, whether one or the other is more skittish or wild. It is not clear what we even mean when we say *wild*.

<sup>71</sup> I mean this literally, since we can imagine the departing lover standing in the doorway, looking back at what s/he is leaving.

<sup>72</sup> ‘Craft Note: The Aubade: Poem of Beginnings,’ an interview between Tarfia Faizullah and Jake Adam York, March 11, 2012. <http://www.kenyonreview.org/2012/03/craft-note-the-aubade-poem-of-beginnings/>

<sup>73</sup> J.A. Baker, *The Peregrine*, p.10

These gestures of holding, and of fleeing the hold (or grip and drift, we might say) are repeated throughout the poem. They are in the exactly inexact light that falls on and departs the face of the Welsh peak of Moelwyn Fach; in the encounter between Elsi Thomas (the “poet’s wife”) and the hunted fox; in the brief scene between actual parting lovers, whose face and hair are tangled, until the moment is disrupted; and entangled entirely in the last stanza’s translation of lines from Robert Williams Parry. I was so fortunate to come across Williams Parry’s poem ‘*Y Llwynog*’. His poem, of which I have taken only the last few lines, covers similar territory to that of the first part of ‘meadows ...’ In his poem, three friends, out for a Sunday walk, encounter a fox on a mountain. Here, too, there is a moment of held breath (the friends are “*heb ysgog ac heb ynom chwyth*,” which we might approximate as “without movement and without breath”). Of course, the moment is shattered when the fox flees over the ridge.

It happened:  
the disturbance  
of a shooting  
star.

I couldn’t resist adopting Williams Parry’s last lines because of that affirmation: *it happened*. Isn’t this what we’re trying to mark? In an aubade, in an elegy, in poetry? It happened once (but is already-no-more). I’ll write it. It’s almost as if it’s still here. Still.

It’s the contained brilliance of the happening that appeals to me. “*Digwyddodd, darfu, megis seren wîb*,” reads that last line in Welsh. *Tarfu* - the root of *darfu* – means to disturb, but it also means to scatter or scare.<sup>74</sup> No one word can include all these meanings, in English. It’s a shame, since, this word, *tarfu*, seems to contain so much of what occurs in an encounter with the wild creature. It disrupts us, it scatters something in us that was once contained. When the creature flees, it carries a small part of us with it, and leaves a small part of itself. This is the brilliance. A meteor burns

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<http://www.geiriadur.net/index.php?page=ateb&term=tarfu&direction=we&type=all&whichpart=beginning>

up, but leaves its trace in the sky, in the retina. It befalls, as I said of Thomas's harrier. A shooting star is also, we might remember, a *falling* star.

If I need offer an excuse for using a translation to end my own poem, I might say the fox is always a translated creature. In an encounter with a fox, something is always lost. Scattered. As I said, it carries something away.

In this collection, I found myself writing poems in parts – and this was particularly the case when the poems relied on the creature to carry them. Again, it is perhaps because a *bearing across* had to occur – a leap in the mind from one section, one impression, to the next. If the creature cannot be held (and it cannot), then we need to approach it from the side. It's the way of hunting, to wait and leap, and when you have failed – and in poetry, we always fail a little bit – you turn and try again.

It does not seem to me to be a coincidence, I should add, that 'to translate' should have its origins in the Latin *translatus*, 'carried over'; that 'metaphor' comes from the Greek *metapherein*, 'to bear across'; or that *enjambment* comes from the French *enjambeur* 'to stride over.' In poetry, in writing, there are so many things we are trying to bring together. The poetic leap is just one action that crosses the rifts of language. That is, it *tries* to cross. It's as much about the effort, the reaching, as it is the success.

Of course, 'meadows ...' is only one poem. Still, there in the other poems we find it again: thresholds, the crepuscular, in-betweenness. Homing, after all, is not the act of arriving. It's the act of navigation and movement. I am reminded of Thomas's lines in his poem 'Pilgrimages':

He is such a fast  
God, always before us, and  
leaving as we arrive. (1993, p. 364)

There is the sense in my work too, of this sought-for, longed-for thing, of which we seem to see only the coat-tails. This might be a necessary result of writing about longing. Desire, is after all, full of those endless distances.

Do we come to the writing of poetry for answers? I don't really think so. Nor is it what we ask of a poem when we read it. Carver's poem, 'Migration', is not a poem so much about the homing instinct of animals; it's a poem about death. In its final stanza, Carver's narrator turns to what he knows will come for his friend. I suppose he begins to grieve what is not yet gone.

He'll be on the move from now on. Traveling night and day,  
without cease, all of him, every last exploding piece  
of him. Until he reaches a place only he knows about.  
An Arctic place, cold and frozen. Where he thinks,  
This is far enough. This is the place.  
And lies down, for he is tired. (2000, p.189)

I say grieve, but isn't this also a kind of salutation? The creatures won't lead us anywhere, in the end. And nor will poetry. But they are so present they make us think of presence. They make us say *this happened*. We happened. We have to bow down to it, and then find a way to speak it again.

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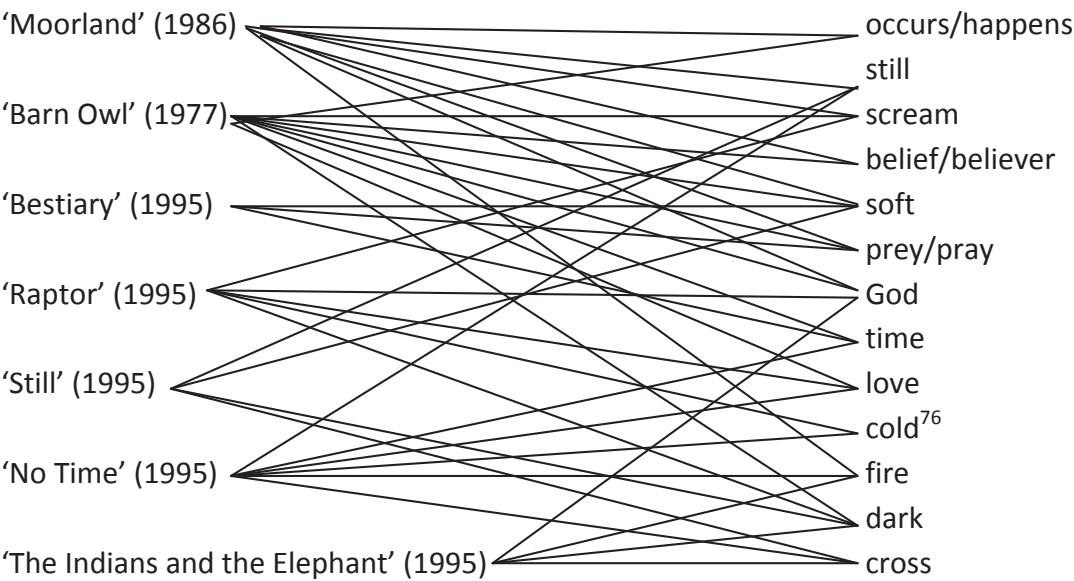
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Appendix

The Shared Vocabulary of the Raptor Poems<sup>75</sup>



<sup>75</sup> this does not include obvious words like talons, wings, or feathers; and allows for small variations on the words listed

<sup>76</sup> including 'freeze', 'snow', etc.

## List of Illustrations

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2. Lucian Freud: *Naked man with Rat*. Oil on canvas, 1977-1978. Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
3. Matthias Grünewald: *The Isenheim Altarpiece: The Crucifixion (detail)*. Mixed media (oil and tempera) on limewood panels, 1512-1516. Musée Unterlinden, Colmar.
4. Matthias Grünewald: *The Isenheim Altarpiece: Saint Anthony Tormented by Demons (detail)*. Mixed media (oil and tempera) on limewood panels, 1512-1516. Musée Unterlinden, Colmar.

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