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'Out in the dark'

An exploration of and creative response to
the process of poetic composition
with reference to Edward Thomas
and a self-reflexive study

Judy Kendall

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Abstract

Research through practice into the actual process of composing, such as William James on automatic writing and thought processes, or Sigmund Freud on creative writing and the unconscious, is rare, and needs extension and updating. This study builds a new theoretical framework for critical and practical work on imaginative composition by investigation of Edward Thomas's composing processes and complementary analysis of the processes of writing my own poetry collection. Thomas's emphasis on fragmentation of thought, hesitancy and silence in the content and form of his poetry, positioning him on the borders of Modernism, reflects essential aspects of his composing processes, as documented in his notes, letters, prose and poetry. The creating and revisiting of my own works-in-progress and final collection, in the light of the study of Thomas and in dialogue with readers, reveals further insights into poetic composition.

Chapter One examines the point at which poems emerge and the influence of external writing conditions. Chapters Two and Three look at absence in the composing process in ellipses, aporia, gaps and unfinishedness, and in the art of submission as it is used in composing. Chapter Four investigates distraction, non-logical connections and physical and temporal disturbances in composing. Chapter Five shows the importance when composing of sustaining a flexible and exact attention to immediate perceptions and thoughts. The thesis concludes with an original poetry collection resulting from the documentation of my composing processes during the research period. These poems reflect and refract many points made in previous chapters, offering practical evidence of them.

The principles of poetic composition established in this thesis are also more generally applicable to the composing of poetry. Similarities observed in composition processes in other art forms and in the writing of this thesis indicate that these principles also apply to other creative and academic disciplines, providing areas for further research.

Author's Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

Signed

Date Mar 2006

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INTRODUCTION A practical study of the composing process

a mighty struggle with intangibles¹

Edwin Morgan

In his lecture in the Manchester Poetry Centre's 1988-1991 series, Douglas Dunn observes:

Accepted wisdom would have us believe that when a poet sets out to explain his methods of working, the risk that is run is nothing less than the possible killing of his gift. I feel inclined to agree. Having accepted the invitation to participate in this series, I now find myself in a state of funk.²

Along with the seventeen other poets contributing to the series, Dunn was sent, as preparatory guidelines, a number of questions relating to his awareness of his craft. Typical of these questions were the following: 'How conscious are you of metrical considerations in your work?'; 'Are you conscious of manipulating the syntax of your poems to achieve particular effects?'; and 'Do you ever consciously choose, say, native words (and native word-formations processes such as compounding) over Latinate/Romance – or vice-versa?' The reactions of most of the poets taking part reveal an overwhelming sense that essential to their craft is their lack of awareness of it. Edwin Morgan, for example, records that 'to many of the questions my answer was "I don't know", with the even stronger rider "And I don't want to know!"'³

Strong Words: modern poets on modern poetry, published in 2000 and edited by the poets W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis, also focuses on examination of the composing process. It is comprised of selected or commissioned statements on poetry by seventy-four twentieth-century poets, ranging from William Butler Yeats and Ezra Pound to contemporary writers such as Gwyneth Lewis and Paul Muldoon. In the introduction, the two editors record their purpose as attempting 'in each case to find the illuminating moment in a poet's prose, the point at which they reveal something of their own process'. The choice of the verbs 'attempt', 'find' and 'reveal' suggests that,

¹ Edwin Morgan, 'The Poet's Voice and Craft', in Chris. B. McCully, ed., *The Poet's Voice and Craft* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994), pp. 54-67 (p. 56).

² This series was held at the University of Manchester and later published in book form as *The Poet's Voice and Craft*. Douglas Dunn, 'Writing Things Down', in McCully, *The Poet's Voice and Craft*, pp. 84-103, (p. 84).

³ McCully, introduction, p. viii; also, Edwin Morgan, in McCully, p. 54.

as in the case of *The Poet's Voice and Craft*, details of actual processes of composing are not directly accessible. The poets' statements in *Strong Words* also emphasise the inaccessibility of parts of the process of poetic composition. Brendan Kennelly, for example, refers to poetry as 'an attacking force born of a state of conscious surrender', turning 'the whole self into a river of uncertainties', in 'an act of rebellion against the poet himself'. In addition, inaccessibility as an aspect of composing is implicitly recognised by the *Strong Words* editors in their title for the introduction to the book, 'Writing into the Dark'. This title suggests inaccessibility as an aspect not only of the composing process but also of the compositions produced, and, by implication, the experience of reading them. The 'dark' is interpreted here by Herbert and Hollis as 'a necessary space in which the poem can do its work', since 'no good poem ever steps fully into the light or becomes completely accessible, but remains, instead, almost infinitely approachable'.⁴

From 2000 to 2001, as part of a master's thesis in creative writing at Lancaster University, I worked with W. N. Herbert on developing a collection of my poetry, 'Joy Change'. This process involved Herbert questioning me about aspects of my craft and composing processes.⁵ In common with other writers, I experienced a degree of resistance to such invitations to explore my composing processes: I did not know and I did not want to know. However, gradually over this period I became fascinated by my own adverse reactions, by the evident resistance experienced by so many poets when asked to comment on their composing processes, and by the apparent importance in the composing process of just such a lack of awareness.

My growing interest in this subject formed the impetus for the present thesis, which presents a study of the processes of poetry composition in practice during the period of composition. The thesis makes use of two case studies, of an established poet's composing processes and a more personal account. Its focus is on the aspects of the composing process that these case studies reveal.

To embark on such a project immediately throws up questions of access. These relate to the extent a critical approach can provide detailed knowledge of the internal workings of a composing poet, and the extent to which it is possible to safeguard

⁴ Brendan Kennelly, 'Voices', pp. 213-14; also, W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis, eds, *Strong Words: modern poets on modern poetry* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2000), introduction, p. 11.

⁵ The course was long distance, conducted by email while I was living in Japan. The course also involved a series of conferencing sessions in which up to thirty six of my works-in-progress received detailed feedback from various readers, including my supervisors W. N. Herbert and the novelist Linda Anderson, the screen-writer Jayne Steele and twelve other developing poets and novelists.

against misinterpreting that process when such detailed knowledge is not available. One solution is to consult accounts provided by poets of their composing processes. However, this raises another issue, that of reliability of the information given. The accuracy and intent of two of the most well-known of such accounts, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's preface to 'Kubla Khan', and Edgar Allan Poe's essay 'The Philosophy of Composition' on the writing of his poem 'The Raven', have been much discussed.⁶ This is particularly because these accounts were intended for publication and so can be viewed as creative pieces written for specific effect.

Selecting my own processes of composing as the material for one of the case studies in this thesis helps address these issues, since potentially, of any writers I might study, my access to detailed knowledge of my own composing processes is the greatest. To create the necessary documentation of my composing processes, I kept a rigorous, sustained and deliberate record of them during the research period of the thesis. Many of these compositions form a collection of original poetry entitled *The Drier the Brighter*.⁷ Some were also developed into interactive digital poems in collaboration with the digital artist Steven Earnshaw. Because I had ensured that the period of composition of *The Drier The Brighter* coincided with the research period of the more theoretical parts of the thesis, I anticipated that the subject-matter, form and style of the completed poems would be closely related to the theoretical sections, and would therefore both inform observations made in those sections and be informed by them. This proved to be the case. For this reason, *The Drier The Brighter* takes a position equivalent to that of a final chapter in the thesis, and so acts as a complement to the earlier chapters, providing a creative response to the study of poetic composition.

⁶ For more on this, see Elisabeth Schneider, *Coleridge, Opium, and Kubla Khan* (New York: Octagon Books, 1983), pp. 16-17, pp. 22-27; Jack Stillinger, *Coleridge and Textual Instability: The Multiple Versions of the Major Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 74, p. 79, p. 107, p. 111; also, David Perkins, 'The Imaginative Vision of *Kubla Khan*: On Coleridge's Introductory Note', in *Coleridge, Keats, and the Imagination*, ed. by Robert J. Barth and John L. Mahoney (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), pp. 97-108. On Poe, see Richard Kopley and Kevin J. Hayes, 'Two verse masterworks: 'The Raven' and 'Ulalume'', in Kevin J. Hayes, *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 191-204 (p. 194); also, Scott Peeples, 'Poe's "constructiveness" and "The Fall of the House of Usher"', in Hayes, pp. 178-190 (pp. 185-6).

⁷ The collection, *The Drier The Brighter* (held by the researcher), is hereafter referred to in the footnotes as *Brighter*. Italics are used throughout for the title of this unpublished collection to differentiate it from the poem of the same name held within that collection and also referred to in the thesis.

The subjective approach that such a personal study inevitably fosters is in part countered by the rigorous discipline with which the documentation of my composing processes was gathered. This discipline consists of simply transcribing the thoughts that occur when composing. Any considered analysis of them is deferred until a later date. In other words, when documenting my processes, I attempt to remove or dislocate myself from that process and become a scribe, playing the role of an external observer. Such a role is also identified in the thesis as common to the process of composing poetry, and was in fact developed by drawing on my practice of poetic composition. This interrelation of thesis and poetic practice is an indication of the self-reflexivity that is inherent in this project. Frequently, elements observed of the composing process are also enacted within the composing process of the thesis in which these observations are recorded. By ensuring that the documentation of *The Drier The Brighter* poems is comprised of a range of material, I make provision for external checks on my immediate subjective responses. The documentation includes not only initial notes written at the time of composition, but also further information from later memories of that experience, feedback from external readers of the drafts and poems, and my reactions to those readers' responses.

For many poets, feedback and reflective dialogue on works-in-progress is also a common part of the process of composing original poetry. In *The Drier The Brighter* documentation, this process is formalised as part of the research material for the thesis, with one of the poetry readers, the established poet Philip Gross, also taking the role of specialist poetry supervisor for the thesis. As a result, inevitably, a proportion of his feedback relates directly to the subject of the thesis, the process of composing. However, this is complemented by feedback from other readers less formally involved in the development of the thesis. These other readers are comprised of a software engineer, an English teacher, a poetry editor, a teacher and translator, a visual artist, a digital artist-academic and a novelist writer-academic.⁸

⁸ The poetry readers are Geoff Caplan, Galya Makarova, Barbara Dordi, Martin Randall, Mary Ann Mooradian, Siobhan Wall, Steven Earnshaw, and, of course, my specialist poetry supervisor, Philip Gross. Dialogue on works-in-progress is also familiar in the composition of theses. Such dialogues occurred between myself and the supervisory team, consisting of Shelley Saguro with Alan Brown, Simon Dentith and Philip Gross. Further dialogue also occurred with some other readers, in particular, Martin Randall. As a result of such dialogue, for example, Saguro first alerted me to the parallels between Thomas and Virginia Woolf, Dentith identified the allusion to Alexander Pope and Randall introduced me to Freud's concept of *nachträglichkeit*.

Such an indirect approach to my composing processes, through other readers, also reflects another important aspect of those processes, the necessity for a tangential approach. This, too, is highlighted in the content of the thesis. In addition, the use of my responses to external readers' feedback and the frequency with which their comments influence subsequent redraftings indicate the fragility of the division between the roles of writer and reader. These roles often overlap. In fact, as the documentation for this thesis demonstrates, writers can also act as their own readers when distanced from their work.

Another aspect of the discipline applied to this documentation was to ensure that the bulk of it was completed in or before November 2004, the month when I began to structure the insights gathered from the research into the formal thesis argument. In order to guard against data being produced 'to order', poems and drafts worked on after this time are only rarely consulted.⁹

There are some striking similarities between the discipline I adopt and the methodology used by Sigmund Freud when conducting self-analysis of his dreams. Freud's description of his methodology provides, therefore, one useful starting-point for the discussion of poetic composition. Freud writes, referring to himself and his fellow-analysts, that his procedure of self-analysis consists of 'dropping all the directing ideas which at other times control reflection, directing our attention to a single element of the dream, noting the involuntary thoughts that associate themselves with this element'.¹⁰ However, the area covered in this thesis does not extend to the field of psychoanalysis, nor to the effects related to the internal psychological environment of a particular writer, since it would be difficult to produce an objective account of such fields. Instead, the focus remains on the effects on the composing process of the external environment, including within this environment the field of the senses.

⁹ The latest 'new' poem I refer to is the completed version of 'The Best View', dated March 2005, and a reader's comment on it, dated July 2005, which I discuss in Chapter Five. However, I only started writing Chapter Five at the end of March 2005. Other references to documentation gathered after November 2004 refer to feedback received from external readers after completion of the composing process of the piece in question. Documentation of the drafting process is to be found in Judy Kendall, *Records of the composing of The Drier The Brighter* (held by the researcher, 2002-2005), hereafter referred to in the footnotes as *Records*. Documentation of responses from readers is to be found in Judy Kendall, *Email Responses to Poems in Progress: Caplan, Dordi, Gross, Makarova, Mooradian, Randall and Wall* (held by the researcher, 2002-2005), hereafter referred to in the footnotes as *Email Responses*.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. by Abraham Arden Brill (London: Allen & Unwin, 1913; repr. 1997), p. 369.

In terms of contextualisation of this immediate and personal case study, allusion is made to my residency in Japan just prior to the start of this thesis from 1995 to 2002, my assimilation of fragmentary Post-Modernist approaches to poetry, and my collaborative explorations in the very new form of digital poetry during the time of the thesis documentation. However, since there is little distance between myself as researcher and as creator of *The Drier The Brighter* and no formal body of criticism to draw upon, the analysis of *The Drier The Brighter* documentation focuses mainly on the inner workings of this process and does not pretend to provide a consideration of literary or historical contexts. Given the immediacy of the material provided, such a consideration would be precipitate, still on-going as I write.

In the more theoretical part of the thesis, I also focus on the work of an established poet of the early twentieth century who acts as an exemplar of the issues I uncover in the documentation of my composing processes and in *The Drier The Brighter*. In turn, the more critical but distanced examination of this poet is also balanced by the personal immediate investigation of my writings. In addition, the resultant diversity of the material studied, written by hand and on the computer, for the page and for an interactive media, singly and collaboratively, and the divergence in the quality of poetry produced, allows for a broader application of the principles of composing uncovered in the thesis.

The poet I selected is for many reasons an ideal candidate for this study. His writings offer a wealth of information on the process of composing poetry from a number of angles: notes prior to writing poems, letters, prose writings, drafts of poems and poems. The study of this material gives a rounded picture of the processes at work, since it not only documents the process of composition but also indicates the poet's understanding of that process. In addition, he was the most highly regarded critic of contemporary poetry of his day and produced numerous reviews of other poets' work. There is also a growing body of critical writing on him, extending from the early twentieth century to the present time. This acts as a supplement to the primary material, helping provide a historical and literary context. Since much of his life was spent not writing poetry but prose, and the mature poems were all produced in his last two years, his writing career can be viewed as an analogy, writ large, of the process of composing a poem. Crucially, too, and of interest to me as a developing poet, he has had a major influence on many subsequent poets, and is often referred to

as a model as regards the writing of poetry, 'a poet's poet'.¹¹ His name is Edward Thomas.

Thomas's critical heritage includes an unusually large proportion of critical biographies. In 1978, Jan Marsh notes that 'there have been a comparatively large number of books dealing with Thomas's life – three biographical studies and at least three major editions of Thomas's letters to close friends'.¹² The number has risen since. These books make connections between Thomas's writing and developments in his life. Most crucially, they link his outburst of poetry in his late thirties with the onset of the First World War and, more proleptically, with his impending death in that war. The implication is that foreknowledge of this fate spurred him on to write his lyrics, a suggestion that a number of his poems appear to confirm.¹³ In addition, Thomas's whole writing career seems to work up to the writing of the poetry of his final years. As Andrew Motion notes of the development of Thomas's prose writing style: 'With hindsight it is obvious that he was clearing the ground for his poems.'¹⁴ The question of how a poem emerges is therefore crucial to an understanding of Thomas.

Further insights into Thomas's composing processes can be gained from an examination of his linguistic, literary and historical context and reference both to major influences on him, such as William James, Richard Jefferies and Oscar Wilde, and to his near contemporaries, such as Virginia Woolf, Freud and Gertrude Stein, herself initially a student of William James.¹⁵

The context in which Thomas wrote seems, like his writing career, to act as an analogy for the emergence of a poem. Thomas was publishing his writings from 1895 to 1917, a period of rapid urbanisation leading up to the First World War and on the cusp between the grand traditions of the Romantics and the Victorians and the experimentation of Modernism. This time was a period also of revolution in the world

¹¹ Admirers of Edward Thomas's poetry include Alun Lewis, Philip Larkin and Derek Walcott. The *Edward Thomas Fellowship* also lists Walter de la Mare, Ivor Gurney, Ted Hughes, R. S. Thomas, Jeremy Hooker and Andrew Motion. See *Edward Thomas Fellowship*, www.envoy.dircon.co.uk/etf/home.html.

¹² Jan Marsh, *Edward Thomas: A Poet for his Country* (London: Paul Elek, 1978), introduction, p. xiii.

¹³ See, for example, Edward Thomas, *The Collected Poems of Edward Thomas*, ed. by R. George Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 265-267, pp. 333-335, p. 367, p. 369. Where appropriate, further references to this edition, abbreviated to *CP*, will be given after quotations in the text.

¹⁴ Andrew Motion, *The Poetry of Edward Thomas* (London: Hogarth, 1991), p. 22.

¹⁵ Virginia Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage*, was published in 1915. Gertrude Stein published *Three Lives* in 1909 and *Tender Buttons* in 1914.

of fine arts, in linguistics and philology, and in studies of the mind in psychology and the new 'science' of psychoanalysis.¹⁶ Language itself was under severe scrutiny, as evident, for example, in Wilde's earlier experiments with the spoken voice, the Georgian poets' attempts to revitalise poetic language, the later multiple manifestos on poetic writing produced by the various movements of the Imagists, Vorticists and Futurists, and the keen interest shown by poets of this time in Japanese literary aesthetics. Japanese aesthetics were clearly an important influence on the creative work of Yeats, Thomas's close friend and collaborator, Gordon Bottomley, and the Imagist writers.¹⁷ Thomas himself, who, as the major critic of contemporary poetry of his day, reviewed the work of most of these writers, and also wrote on Japanese writers, was also very aware of Japanese aesthetics as this thesis indicates. Although he was closely connected with the writers included in Edward Marsh's Georgian anthologies, particularly Bottomley and Walter de la Mare, and exchanged criticism and writing ideas with them, his own work never appeared in these anthologies and he was also to some extent critical of their work.¹⁸ Similarly, his opinion of early Modernist work was muted.¹⁹ However, features of his writing very much anticipate later Modernist writings, and, in particular, as this thesis shows, strong parallels exist between his work and Woolf's later writings.

Thomas's work, therefore, mirrors the conflicts of his time, as Edna Longley acknowledges when she calls him a 'radical continuator', standing "'on a strange bridge alone"' ('The Bridge') between Romantics and Moderns'.²⁰ This image of a man on a bridge is typical of Thomas. The speakers of his poems not only express but also inhabit indecision and indeterminacy. The slippery syntax of his poetry has been termed by D. J. Enright as 'unamenable to high-level exegesis: try, for example, to

¹⁶ For further details on this, see Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

¹⁷ For the influence of Noh on Bottomley, see Bottomley, *A Stage for Poetry: My Purposes with My Plays* (Kendal: Titus Wilson, 1948), p. 12; also, Thomas to Bottomley, *Letters from Edward Thomas to Gordon Bottomley*, ed. by R. George Thomas (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), hereafter referred to as *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 75 (18 January 1905); Bottomley, *Poems of Thirty Years* (London: Constable, 1925), pp. 135-6; David Ewick, 'Other Poets and Works', in *Japonisme, Orientalism, Modernism: a Bibliography of Japan in English-Language Verse of the Early 20th Century*, www.themargins.net/bib/C/ca/ca03.html.

¹⁸ See *Edward Thomas on the Georgians*, ed. by Richard Emeny (Cheltenham: Cyder Press, 2004). See also Bodleian Library, Letters to Walter de la Mare, MS Eng lett c 376; also, *Letters to Bottomley*.

¹⁹ See, for example, his review of *Exultations of Ezra Pound*, 'The Newest Poet', *Daily Chronicle*, 23 November 1909, p. 3.; also, his review of *Des Imagistes*, 'Exotic Verse', *New Weekly*, 1.8 (9 May 1914), 249.

²⁰ Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1986), p. 47.

give a lecture course on the work of Edward Thomas'.²¹ Critics who write on Thomas emphasise the lacunae, the contradictions and the ambiguities in his writing. John Lucas, for example, describes it as the 'carefully weighed qualification of utterance – the brooding hesitations that are unique to Thomas's mode of spoken verse'.²² As this thesis shows, these qualities also reflect crucial elements in the process of composing, re-enacted by Thomas in his body of poetic work, which itself remains in some sense in process, cut short by his early death.

The provisional quality inherent in his poetry has at times been taken too literally by his editors. The liberties R. G. Thomas took with some of Thomas's poems in the classic 1978 Clarendon Press *Collected Poems* have been detailed at length by John Pikoulis in his article 'On Editing Edward Thomas'. Pikoulis records his 'reservations about its titles, texts, and punctuation'.²³ Later editors have amended some of these anomalies in silent readjustments in the 2004 re-issue of R. G. Thomas's edition by Faber and Faber.²⁴ However, the 1978 edition is the main text of Thomas's poems consulted in this thesis, because of its detailed coverage of different versions and successive drafts of a number of the poems. For sake of consistency, therefore, the titles used in the thesis will be those of the 1978 edition, but, to avoid any confusion, a list of major differences from titles in Selwyn & Blount's 1920 *Collected Poems* and Edna Longley's 1973 edition, *Poems and Last Poems*, appears in an appendix to this introduction.²⁵

Thomas wrote a great deal on the composing process, and it is present in the subject-matter of many of his poems. He refers to it in his critical writing on other poets. He also conducted a number of epistolary conversations on his developing work with a select group of friends, indicating once again the tendency for poets to use external readers when composing. In addition, his letters include numerous incidental references to his experiences of composition. As a result, to some extent this thesis provides an epistolary reading of this process. However, although Thomas often alludes to it in his writings, it rarely forms the main subject. Like the poets mentioned

²¹ D. J. Enright, *The Oxford Book of Contemporary Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), introduction, p. xxviii.

²² John Lucas, *The Radical Twenties* (Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 1997), p. 203.

²³ John Pikoulis, 'On Editing Edward Thomas', *PN Review* 103, 21.5 (1995), 52-56 (p. 52).

²⁴ See Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems*, ed. by R. George Thomas (London: Faber and Faber, 2004); also, Judy Kendall's review of this edition, 'A Breath of Air', *PN Review* 164, 31.6 (2005), 62 (p. 62).

²⁵ Edward Thomas, *Collected Poems* (London: Selwyn & Blount, 1920); also, *Poems and Last Poems*, ed. by Edna Longley (London: Collins, 1973).

earlier, he too prefers to write 'out in the dark', placing emphasis on the mystery inherent in this process and the importance of retaining lack of awareness of it.²⁶ He also expresses hesitancy in explaining it too closely, observing, when attempting to gloss one of his poems, that 'I am afraid I am meddling now'.²⁷ This hesitancy is partly responsible for the indirectness of many of his references to the composing process. In addition, his poems are written very rapidly, often in the space of a day, and their arrival tends to be unexpected. Such rapidity of composition necessarily limits the records that can be kept of the processes involved. As a result, despite Thomas's evident interest in this subject, current access to his composition processes is to some extent adventitious, limited to what he chose, happened or had the opportunity to record. This makes the documentation of my own composition methods, specifically undertaken for the purposes of this study and therefore more tailored to its requirements, a natural and significant complement to the examination of Thomas's processes.

Although my exposure to Japanese culture, assimilation of Post-Modernist approaches and explorations of digital poetry find parallels in the interest in Japanese aesthetics and the experimental climate of writers and artists in the period in which Thomas was composing, there are clearly great differences in context, situation and quality in the two case studies. However, despite these differences, they are often mutually illuminating. Aspects of composing observed in Thomas's practice are mirrored in the form, style and subject-matter of *The Drier The Brighter* poems. This is in part a reflection of the fact that *The Drier The Brighter* consists only of poems that were in process during the collection and analysis of documentation for this thesis, and that were either already completed or only undergoing final adjustments during the writing up of the thesis. In addition, the parallels observed in my poetry are also an indicator of Thomas's huge influence on subsequent writers. Equally, however, some of the insights into Thomas's processes that are revealed in the thesis originate in observations of the processes recorded in *The Drier The Brighter* documentation, predictably so, since this documentation, having been specifically compiled for the thesis, is more overtly focused on the processes of composing than Thomas's writings.

²⁶ 'Out in the dark' is the title of one of Thomas's last poems.

²⁷ *Edward Thomas: The Last Four Years*, by Eleanor Farjeon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 237 (27 December 1916). This comment is made in reference to his poem 'Out in the dark'.

Such interrelated effects themselves form part of the argument of the thesis, which discusses ways in which drafts and the process of their development into poems can be strongly affected by the conditions in which they are written. In the case of *The Drier The Brighter*, these conditions include the process of composing the thesis and also the process of researching Thomas's writings. On some occasions, the response to this influence is deliberate. My study of the idiosyncrasies of Thomas's punctuation and use of spaces in his handwriting, for example, has a direct influence on the ordering of the poems in *The Drier The Brighter*. I deliberately place poems using spaced or unusually highlighted punctuation in the opening and closing pages of the collection.²⁸ On other occasions, however, the influence is more subtle. My first use of spaced punctuation, in *The Drier The Brighter* poem 'unfamiliar', the poem that is later selected to open the collection, occurs without any overt awareness of Thomas's similar use of it. I only make this connection two days later, as the following note reveals: 'I had the idea of '/', less". And then, of course working on it now, I think of ET.'²⁹

The influence of the environment on the composing process also applies to the thesis itself. The delayed discovery of the Thomas influence on 'unfamiliar', for example, contributes to the redrafting of that poem, and also to the development of the poetry collection and of arguments in the thesis. Aware of the relation between my use of spaced punctuation and Thomas's, I experiment further with it in another poem, 'lost', the poem that is later placed at the end of the collection, thus highlighting my use of spaced punctuation in the collection's very structure.³⁰ At the same time, in the more theoretical part of the thesis, I investigate the role that spaced punctuation plays in the process of composing both 'unfamiliar' and 'lost', as well as in Thomas's letters and prose. Thus, in a dynamic process of exchange, points drawn from one area of the thesis are applied to another.

An even subtler example of this process of exchange is *The Drier The Brighter* poem, 'patched work'.³¹ This poem was partly inspired by Woolf's description of memory running 'her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither'.³² Woolf's image was drawn from a passage in Goethe's *Faust*. I discover a year after writing

²⁸ These poems are 'lost', '-wards', 'patched work' and 'unfamiliar', in *Brighter*, pp. 227-9 and p. 266.

²⁹ Judy Kendall, Records, filed under 'angel cake', 10 April 2004. ET refers to Thomas. See *Brighter*, p. 266.

³⁰ *Brighter*, p. 227.

³¹ See *Brighter*, p. 229.

³² Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (London: Hogarth Press, 1928), pp. 73-74.

'patched work' that Freud also quotes from the same translation of *Faust* when he is discussing the importance of the associative and converging qualities of dream-thoughts.³³ Since I incorporate the passage from Freud in my discussion of control and flexibility of attention in the process of composing, this results in the image used in 'patched work' resurfacing, indirectly, in the more theoretical part of the thesis. In addition, on revisiting the final version of 'patched work', I discover that a further aspect of the composing process identified in the thesis is contained within it: the importance of indirection and inattention and the part played by hindsight and successive memories of an event. Finally, when searching for epigraphs to include within the thesis, and wishing to reflect in some of these epigraphs the connections observed within the thesis between Thomas's poetry, aspects of the composing process and Japanese aesthetics, I discover a translation of a poem written by a highly regarded Japanese poet, Shinkichi Takahashi, born in 1901 and therefore a near contemporary of Thomas. One stanza in this poem contains the same image that Woolf and Freud draw on, although, in the Japanese poem, the needle is now made of bamboo: 'With that bamboo needle / She knits all space'.³⁴

The five initial chapters of the thesis cover a number of aspects of the composing process. They include examination of elements present before the process of composition begins, as well as looking at elements present during the composition process, in the completed pieces and even in the eventual collection of those pieces as a body of work. Each of these chapters is immediately followed by appendices of material related to that chapter.

Chapter One focuses on the point at which a poem emerges in the poet's awareness, the processes that precede that point, and the immediate and delayed influences of external writing conditions on the poem. It also looks at links, particularly as evinced in Thomas's work, between the composing of poetry and the oral tradition. It shows how the beginnings of the composing process can be said to lie within experiences of the physical environment.

³³ The first draft of 'patched work' was dated 4 December 2003, and the inclusion of the quotation from Woolf occurred in a subsequent draft dated 26 January 2004, Kendall, Records, filed under 'Matching'. See also Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. by Brill, p. 174, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust, A Tragedy: The First Part*, trans. by Bayard Taylor (London: Strahan, 1871), p. 92 (Act I, Scene 4). The original German for the *Faust* quotation can be found in Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. by James Strachey, 15 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990 – 1993), IV (1991), 388.

³⁴ 'Stitches', trans. by Lucien Stryk, in Stryk, *Where we are* (London: Skoob Books, 1997), p. 159. One stanza of this poem appears as an epigraph in Chapter Three, p. 101.

Chapters Two and Three look at how absence is used to articulate such experiences in the process of writing poetry. Chapter Two discusses absence as it appears in drafts and poems in the form of ellipses and aporia, taking ellipses as indicators of omission, and aporia as representation of what is inaccessible. Absence as gaps, or unfilled space, and absence in the aesthetic of unfinishedness are examined in Chapter Three. These chapters highlight the ways in which a writer, when composing, has to learn to submit to the unfolding patterns revealed by a work-in-progress, and ways in which that work continues to be in process even when completed. They also look at the active part blank space plays, both in drafts and in completed works, and the emotional import of such space. In addition, absence as a measure of the point at which a work can be said to cohere into a final text, and the ways in which absence is employed in the new form of digital poetry are discussed.

Chapter Four investigates the crucial role of dislocation in composing. Dislocations can result from physical and temporal disturbances caused by changes, for example, in external writing conditions or the transforming effects of memory. Dislocation can also take the form of distraction or associative non-logical or other indirect connections, resulting in shifts in attention. The distancing of the writer from his or her work-in-progress as a result of readers' feedback on drafts and completed poems, and the effects on the poem of a focus that tracks the present moment and immediate physical sensations are also discussed.

Chapter Five argues for the importance of a sustained, open and exact attention to immediate perceptions and thoughts when composing. It discusses the way Thomas's poetry, controlled but flexible, resists conclusions, and so succeeds, even in its completed forms, to remain in process. In so doing, this chapter confirms Thomas's special position and importance as a poet of the composing process.

The thesis concludes with practical evidence of aspects of poetic composition, taking the form of the final version of my original collection of poems, *The Drier The Brighter*. In keeping with the subject of this thesis, *The Drier The Brighter* presents an implicit, practical and creative response to the subject of writing 'into' and 'out in the dark'. By so doing, it concludes this innovatory interaction of theory and personal practical experience of creative composition, which dramatically pushes forward the field of research-through-practice in creative writing.

Appendix A

A comparison of substantially altered poem titles in R. G. Thomas's 1978 edition of *The Collected Poems of Edward Thomas* with the same titles in Selwyn & Blount's 1920 *Collected Poems* and Edna Longley's 1973 *Poems and Last Poems*.³⁵

1978 *Collected Poems*

'November Sky'
'Song [2]'
'Household Poems': 1 Bronwen
 2 Merfyn
 3 Myfanwy
 4 Helen

'Go Now'
'Bugle Call'
'The Pond'
'Song [3]'
'Bob's Lane'
'The Swifts'
'Blenheim Oranges'
'M.E.T.'

1920 *Collected Poems*, 1973 *Poems and Last Poems*

'November'
'As the Clouds that are so Light'
'If I Should Ever by Chance'
'If I were to Own'
'What Shall I give?'
'And You, Helen'
'Like the Touch of Rain'
'No One Cares Less than I'
'Bright Clouds'
'Early One Morning'
'Women He Liked'
'How at Once'
'Gone, Gone Again'
'No One So Much As You'
(not in the 1973 edition)

³⁵ Edna Longley is currently working on a new edition of *Poems and Last Poems*.

CHAPTER ONE Starting-points: how poems emerge

I need to be in a position to write when writing comes. ¹

Carol Ann Duffy

That other thing whats looking out thru your eye hoals. It aint you
nor it don't even know your name. Its in us lorn and loan and
sheltering how it can. ²

Russell Hoban

When observing the poetic process, an obvious place to start is the point at which a poem emerges in the poet's awareness and is recorded on the page. The importance of such initial moments of composing for Edward Thomas is indicated in the detail of his writing career. As noted in the introduction, for most of this career, from 1897 to 1913, Thomas produced much criticism and prose but practically no poetry, so these years can be viewed as an analogy of the process of beginning to write a poem. This analogy is corroborated by the emphasis in his work on the beginnings of articulation, an emphasis that is continued in his final poems. However, to take this analogy further, the long delay preceding the writing of Thomas's mature poetry also suggests that the point at which a poem emerges into a poet's awareness is not its starting-point. It is preceded by a lengthy process that leaves little visible trace. An examination of the earliest records of a composition, therefore, needs also to take into consideration the conditions in which these records are written in order to assess what part these conditions have played in the composing process prior to the poem's emergence in the poet's awareness and on the page.

¹ Elisa Bray, 'The 5-Minute Interview: Carol Ann Duffy', *Independent*, 13 August 2005, p. 10.

² *Riddley Walker* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980; repr. Picador, 1982), p. 6.

The Physical Context

The imaginary recreation and the trace on the sand which is all that remains of the wind itself. ³

Jonathan Bate

In cases where drafts and notes towards a poem directly record details of the environment in which they are written, the influence of that environment on the subsequent process of composition is clear, since the details recorded are then often worked into the developing poem. However, the environment in which the process of composing begins, and the extent of the writer's awareness of this environment, can also be shown to have an effect on the style of the eventual poem.

notes from the environment

Probably at the back of it all is my notebook habit. ⁴

Edward Thomas

As a precursor to poetic and prose composition, Thomas frequently resorts to note-taking. In 'How I Began', he records how he developed this habit as a child:

At that age [eight or nine] I was given a small notebook in a cover as much like tortoiseshell as could be made for a penny. In this I wrote down a number of observations of my own accord.⁵

This habit continues throughout his writing life. His topographical books are regularly preceded by periods of walking the ground to be covered, accompanied by copious note-taking; his biographies begin with long periods of research and note-taking in the British Museum on the writing habits of the subjects of his books; and a number of his poems are, as R. G. Thomas observes in his notes to the 1978 *Collected Poems*, either reworked directly from notes, or from previous prose passages which were themselves drawn from notes.⁶

Thomas admits a heavy reliance on notes as a writing source. He comments

³ *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000), p. 281.

⁴ Thomas to de la Mare, Bodleian, MS Eng lett c 376, Letters to Walter de la Mare, folio 66 (9 October 1909).

⁵ 'How I Began', in *The Last Sheaf* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), pp. 15-20 (p. 16).

⁶ See *CP*, notes, p. 379.

that 'I go about the world with a worried heart & a note book.'⁷ He sometimes even instructs his wife to file or return his letters so that he can use them as notes, writing, for example, that 'I hope you won't mind if I make this a notebook as well as a letter'.⁸ In addition, when burning much of his correspondence previous to setting out for the Front, he still retains his notebooks.

He was also aware early on of the potentiality of his *in situ* notes to be considered as creative pieces without further development of them. At the suggestion of his publishers, his first book, *The Woodland Life*, includes a selection of his field notes, entitled 'A Diary in English Fields and Woods'. Inclusion in *The Woodland Life* puts these notes on an equal footing with the more worked creative pieces in the volume.⁹ Subsequently, Thomas continues this trend by including more 'open-air' diaries in *The Book of the Open Air*.¹⁰ The tradition has continued posthumously with his final war diary being given special treatment by his editors who link it closely with his poems. In *Edward Thomas: Selected Poems and Prose*, David Wright separates the diary from the other prose items, placing it next to the poems.¹¹ R. G. Thomas also chooses to add the same diary as an appendix to his edition of Thomas's *Collected Poems*, observing that it 'is carefully phrased and Thomas corrects words and phrases as in all his working drafts' (*CP*, 460, fn. 1), and that

it seems to contain the germs of ideas, books, and poems that were never to be written but that were surely present in his mind. Even more clearly it reveals the consistency of the poet's entire writing life grounded as that was upon his powerful sensuous response to the world of living and natural things. (*CP*, 460-61)

When preparing for his travel and topographical books, Thomas worked from notes on physical and natural environments that are invariably drawn from the

⁷ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 158 (26 February 1908). The abbreviations and lack of punctuation in a number of Thomas's notes and letters are left strategically in place since these reflect their status as immediate comments on his composing processes.

⁸ National Library of Wales, Letters: Edward Thomas to Helen, 1901-13, MS 22915C, folio 198 (11 February 1913). See also *Letters to Helen*, ed. by R. George Thomas (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), p. 63, p. 66, p. 69, p. 73, p. 73.

⁹ *The Woodland Life* (London: Blackwood, 1897), pp. 157-234; see also R. George Thomas, *Edward Thomas: A Portrait* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 46-7, hereafter referred to as *Portrait*. However, another of Thomas's biographers, R. P. Eckert, writes that it was not the publishers but Ashcroft Noble who suggested that the diary 'was subsequently published as a part of *The Woodland Life*', R. P. Eckert, *Edward Thomas: A Biography and a Bibliography* (London: Dent, 1937), p. 20.

¹⁰ 'An Open-air Diary for October' and 'An Open-air Diary for May', in *The Book of the Open Air*, ed. by Edward Thomas, 2 vols (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1907), I, p. iv, and II, pp. iv-v.

¹¹ *Edward Thomas: Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. by David Wright (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), pp. 273-82.

external environment in which they were written. In consequence, the pieces developed from those notes also bear a close relation to that environment. Thomas clearly valued this connection, as the following lament reveals: ‘One little note used to recall to me much of the glory or joy of former days out of doors. Now it is barren.’¹² An example of such a connection occurs in the writing of his ‘travel’ book, *The Ickniel Way*. Appropriately, Thomas’s notes for this book, like those he made for many of his ‘travel’ books, were written as he was travelling over the land he was intending to write about. In addition, as he observes in his dedicatory preface to the book, in the course of writing this book, both the ancient road and his physical journey along it become images of that process of composition. He writes that *The Ickniel Way* is ‘in some ways a fitting book for me to write. For it is about a road which begins many miles before I could come on its traces and ends miles beyond where I had to stop.’¹³

His poems are also closely related to the environment. Many of them feature journeys, roads and the dark expressed in long and roundabout sentence constructions. Thomas records that a number were drafted on ‘long slow’ train journeys from military camp to home, observing that ‘I sometimes write in the train going home late’.¹⁴ Of the lengthy, clause-ridden sentences that make up the poem ‘I never saw that land before’, Thomas takes the trouble to note that they were written ‘going home from Hare Hall’ camp.¹⁵ The poem ‘Roads’, too, an exploration of roads as its title suggests, was also written while travelling. R. G. Thomas amplifies on these connections, observing of Thomas’s habit of writing on trains that the ‘train journey home [from military camp] was long and roundabout and two poems at least, “The Child in the Orchard” and “Lights Out”, were worked on in semi-darkness.’¹⁶ Thomas himself notes that he began writing ‘Lights Out’, which revolves around entering a dark forest alone, while ‘coming down in the train on a long dark journey when people were talking and I wasn’t’.¹⁷ The almost mnemonic rhythm of ‘The Child in the

¹² Thomas to Ian MacAlister, *Edward Thomas: Selected Letters*, ed. by R. G. Thomas (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 27 (1 November 1903).

¹³ *The Ickniel Way* (London: Constable, 1913), dedication, pp. vi-vii.

¹⁴ *The Last Four Years*, by Eleanor Farjeon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 220 (postmarked 12 November 1916); Thomas to Robert Frost, *Elected Friends: Robert Frost & Edward Thomas to one another*, ed. by Matthew Spencer (New York: Handsel Books, 2003), p. 119 (January 1916), hereafter referred to as *Elected Friends: R.F. & E.T.*

¹⁵ Bodleian, MS Don d 28, Poems, p. 37.

¹⁶ *Portrait*, p. 275.

¹⁷ *Last Four Years*, p. 217 (postmarked 2 November 1916).

Orchard', with its repeated lines and echoes of nursery rhymes, also reflects its writing conditions. The darkness of the train obliges the poet to depend more on his memory than the written page while composing.

The search for a home is a theme that informs many of Thomas's poems. This is also related to the initial environment in which they were composed. Of the fair handwritten copy of sixty-seven poems in the Bodleian manuscript of the 1917 *Poems*, the only ones on which Thomas has noted the conditions in which they were written are eleven poems composed in transit.¹⁸ Apart from one of these, which does not specify the destination, Thomas's notes indicate that they were written when he was 'going home' or 'coming home', mainly from military camp. In the case of the poem 'The Sheiling', Thomas notes that he began composing it while 'travelling back from Gordon Bottomley's (Silverdale)'. Silverdale was a spiritual home or place of sanctuary for Thomas, and this is reflected in the poem's exploration of the subject of an ideal home. Thus, the travelling conditions in which they were written also surface in the poems themselves.

The documentation of the composing process of my *The Drier The Brighter* collection provides further evidence for the close relation between initial notes, their environment and the final poem. My 'Spring Hijack' began, like many other *The Drier The Brighter* poems, in a note.¹⁹ When, much later, this note was typed onto the computer, it was prefixed with the following comment: 'found this fragment faintly scribbled on paper in an old rucksack - probably written on way to the 3 day training seminar'.²⁰ The conjecture in this note about the poem's source is supported by the date of the training seminar which happened also to be recorded in my diary. It is also supported by my recollection that I had used that rucksack when going to the seminar and that the journey there had been very cold, and by the confirming similarity between my memory of that journey and details of it in the draft and final poem. The extent of the impact of the external environment on these notes is indicated by the way I make use of details of that environment to ascertain the source of the notes.

¹⁸ See Bodleian, MS Don d 28, *Poems*, p. 2, p. 17, p. 20, p. 22, p. 27, p. 32, p. 37, p. 50, p. 60, p. 64, p. 69.

¹⁹ See Appendix B at the end of this chapter, and *Brighter*, p. 235.

²⁰ As with the notes and letters of Thomas, the grammatical and typing errors and the abbreviations of many of the notes and emails in the *Brighter* documentation are left strategically in place since these reflect their status as immediate comments on my composing processes rather than finished or considered statements.

'Spring Hijack' also records literal physical interactions. Basic rhythms of moving through the countryside are translated into the poem. The initial draft was written on a small piece of paper on a moving and sometimes bumpy bus-ride down winding country roads. In such conditions, it is easier to write if the number of lines is reduced, since each new line requires the pencil to lift off the page in order to return to the left hand margin, and one striking feature of this initial draft is, as Philip Gross notes, its 'strong stanza-breaks with longish, almost prose-journal lines, one sentence each'.²¹

Thomas's 'Words' is another poem written in transit. Like the initial notes for my 'Spring Hijack', its content, form and rhythm reflect its unexpected and unintentional conception as well as the external environment in which this occurred. Thomas records that it was written on various 'scraps' at intervals on a cycling trip up and down the steep hills of Gloucestershire.²² The rhythm of these journeys is reflected in the short lines of 'Words', which, in an accumulation of brief phrases, build up the poem. More pragmatically, short lines are easier to hold in the head, which is helpful when composing while cycling.

An indication of Thomas's awareness of the fact that physical conditions can impinge on a piece of writing is given in his introduction to Borrow's *Zincali*. Thomas judges the success of Borrow's prose by its ability to conjure up the environment and conditions in which it was written. He notes that it was 'written, as he [Borrow] tells us, chiefly at Spanish inns during his journeys', and that Borrow's subsequently published letters from Spain, 'which formed the basis for a great part of *The Bible in Spain*, show us that he wrote his portly but vigorous prose fresh from the saddle and from the scenes depicted; and upon some of these letters or the journals, their sources, he drew for the earlier book.'²³ In his critical biography of George Borrow, Thomas also refers, in discussion of Borrow's *The Bible in Spain*, to the book as being 'just as fresh as the letters'.²⁴

Such notes are not necessarily intended as preparation for writing. The filing procedure for the documentation of the process of composing *The Drier The Brighter* poems includes a paper file entitled 'Poem Ideas'. However, the fragment that later

²¹ Philip Gross to Kendall, Judy Kendall, Email Responses, 5 May 2004.

²² See *Last Four Years*, p. 150 (29 June 1915).

²³ Edward Thomas, ed., *The Zincali: an account of the Gypsies of Spain*, by George Borrow (London: Dent, 1914), introduction, p. vii.

²⁴ *George Borrow: The Man and His Books* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1912), p. 165.

became 'Spring Hijack' was never put in this file because at the time I did not consider it as a potential source for a poem. As a result, it was nearly lost altogether. In addition, not all notes for *The Drier The Brighter*, even if filed in 'Poem Ideas', become poems. 'Spring Hijack' did eventually become part of *The Drier The Brighter*, but a number of such notes taken during the writing of the collection have remained as notes, their potential as creative pieces as yet undeveloped.

This also occurs in Thomas's case. He writes, of the process of composing an essay, that 'I have filled 4 notebooks since *The Heart of England* & used not a line of them', and, of his preparations for a book on Borrow, that 'I am a slow, muddled & ill-informed writer.'²⁵ The notes exist first, and then the subject, or successive subjects, is at some point selected from them: 'I sit down with my abundant notebooks and find a subject or an apparently suggestive sentence.'²⁶ Thus, many of the initial prose versions of Thomas's poems can be found in texts written long before he considered himself seriously as a poet.²⁷ As with notes that are later transformed into creative pieces, so with prose versions of poems: their eventual form or forms as creative pieces often remain unknown at the time of writing.

The fragility of the first notes that later became 'Words' also confirms that they were not initially considered as potential material for a poem, and that Thomas, like myself when writing the initial 'Spring Hijack' notes, was unprepared for the activity of composition. In both cases, the writer was recording these notes on material that could easily have been lost, compelled to write in conditions that were far from suitable.

When Thomas composed 'Words', he had not written any poetry for about a month: 'On the road I was making these verses, the first for a long time.'²⁸ As noted earlier, he was writing on whatever scraps of paper he could find, referring later in the same letter to '2 lines that got left out owing to the scraps I wrote on as I travelled'. His lack of appropriate writing material is an indication of the unexpected advent of this composing process. The poem hijacks the poet.

²⁵ Thomas to de la Mare, Bodleian, MS Eng lett c 376, Letters to Walter de la Mare, folio 23 (10 August 1907).

²⁶ Thomas to MacAlister, *Selected Letters*, p. 27 (1 November 1903).

²⁷ See, for example, R. G. Thomas's notes to 'Old Man', 'The Other' and 'The Mountain Chapel' in *CP*, p. 18, pp. 381-2, p. 383, pp. 443-4.

²⁸ *Last Four Years*, p. 150 (postmarked 29 June 1915).

The content of both 'Words' and 'Spring Hijack' also reflects the poems' uncertain beginnings. In 'Words', words choose the poet, or to be more precise, the poet pleads with words to choose him:

Choose me,
You English words! (CP, 217)

In 'Spring Hijack', spring and the journey itself are hijacked by snow. The initial notes to 'Spring Hijack' read:

snow clouds threatening
petrol cashpoints, roundabouts
and AA recommended inns²⁹

This description also acts as an image of the unplanned onset of the composing process.

Just as the specific purposes of an individual note may only be revealed to the writer retrospectively, so the uncertainty of its final destination can also have an effect on the piece developed from it. Ian Sansom makes reference to this in his review of the 2004 edition of Thomas's *Collected Poems*. He observes:

[The poems] read like echoes of themselves, like broken-up, vaguely blank-verseish prose and indeed, in many instances, that's exactly what they are. If anything explains the continuing appeal of his poems, it's probably that Thomas seems to have no clear idea of what he's doing or where's [*sic*] he's going; the effort is all.³⁰

However, while Sansom's description of the effect of Thomas's poems is accurate, the uncertainty they manifest is often deliberate, intended and knowing. This point will be discussed further later in the thesis.

The strength of the role the environment plays in the writing of a poem also relates to the medium used. In the writing of *The Drier The Brighter*, the demands of documenting that process ensure that most of the drafts, even the initial notes, are preserved more assiduously than would otherwise be the case, and the majority are, therefore, recorded directly onto a computer, and stored in a folder entitled 'My Poems', thus determining their status as poetic drafts from the onset. Nevertheless, as in the case of the initial 'Spring Hijack' notes, a number of initial drafts or notes are written in less than ideal circumstances, aboard moving trains or buses. Nine of the initial drafts of the twenty-five *The Drier The Brighter* poems worked on between October 2003 and July 2004, for example, have been copied onto the computer from

²⁹ See Appendix B for the full text of these initial notes.

³⁰ 'Where the wood ends', *The Saturday Guardian*, 6 November 2004, p. 25.

notes written in other settings. So, even in circumstances where the writer is strongly motivated to write on a computer, it is still not always possible to control the time and place in which the initial composing process takes place.

It does not follow, however, that a passage written or typed in a sedentary position is not affected by its external environment. In conditions similar to Coleridge's experience of composing 'This Lime Tree Bower My Prison' when unable to go walking with his friends, Thomas's poem 'The Lofty Sky' was composed while he was confined inside with an injured ankle.³¹ Correspondingly, the subject of 'The Lofty Sky' revolves around a sense of confinement, and the desire to escape it.

An example of a poem written in sedentary conditions in *The Drier The Brighter* documentation is my 'absence of birdsong'.³² This was typed from start to finish indoors on a computer, early in the morning. These conditions are reflected both in the poem's content and in its title. Whereas 'The Lofty Sky' focuses on the outdoor environment to which the writer is denied access, 'absence of birdsong' pays attention to a closer source of stimuli that still remains available: the bodily sensations. So, both cases show the impact on the poem of the environment in which composing takes place, either of the outdoor environment or of sensations felt on the body.

Of all the drafts of a poem, the initial notes would appear to be both the furthest from the finished poem and the closest to the external environment from which they spring, although in a number of cases in *The Drier The Brighter* documentation, after a number of drafts have gone by, I eventually return to elements present in the initial notes. *The Drier The Brighter* documentation has preserved nearly all the initial notes to poems. These tend to lack titles and clear line-breaks, and are often not easily recognizable as the beginnings of a poem. In many cases, at the time of writing them, or shortly afterwards, I record doubts as to their potential destination as poems, and a number of those not initially written at the computer are only typed up retrospectively when I am working on a subsequent draft and realise with hindsight that they are in fact bona fide poem notes.

When Thomas refers to how a note can 'recall to me' the 'glory or joy' of the external environment, he suggests that the beginnings of the composing process lie not

³¹ See *Last Four Years*, p. 110 (10 January 1915); also, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poetical Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Ernest Hartley Coleridge, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), I, 178–81.

³² *Brighter*, p. 256.

in the note itself but in the experience of the environment that they record.³³ The note can only reflect and potentially recall that experience. Such references indicate that Thomas is moving towards the extreme claim that human language has developed from man's relation with his environment and depends upon that relationship. In terms of poetic composition, this implies that the process of composing commences with the writer's interaction with the environment, not with the act of writing the note. In his prose piece, 'Reading out of doors', Thomas goes further, suggesting that this process is in fact initiated by the environment, not man. He writes:

I have ever found that my own thoughts, or those which the landscape and the air thought for me, even far beyond the range of such as they [Spenser, Wordsworth, Thoreau]. There is more wisdom in the amber maple leaf or the poise of a butterfly or the silence of a league of oaks than in all the poems of Wordsworth.³⁴

For Thomas, the 'landscape and the air' are not only conditions that exist before language and from which language will spring, but offer the first moments of the creation of that language. Thomas's description of the way they 'think' his thoughts for him implies that they also to some degree 'write' the creative work that follows, Thomas's role being that of amanuensis.

the vernacular of birdsong

'Tis then as if, in some far childhood heard,
A wild heart languished at the call of a bird,
Crying through ruinous windows, high and fair,
A secret incantation on the air:
A language lost; which, when its accents cease,
Breathes, voiceless, of a pre-Edenic peace.³⁵
Walter de la Mare

If a poem begins in the experience of the environment and in the note in which this is recorded, then, in order to examine that process further, it is necessary to focus directly upon that experience. This is exactly what Thomas does in 'Insomnia', an essay he wrote on the process of composing that is crucial to this study of the composing process. The narrator of this essay can be closely identified with Thomas, since the account the narrator gives of composing closely matches one given by

³³ Thomas to MacAlister, *Selected Letters*, p. 27 (1 November 1903).

³⁴ 'Reading out of doors', *Atlantic Monthly*, 92 (1903), 275-277 (p. 276).

³⁵ 'Incantation', in *The Collected Poems of Walter de la Mare* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 256. From *Memory and Other Poems* (1938).

Thomas in a letter to de la Mare.³⁶ The relevant passage in 'Insomnia' begins with a description of birdsong.

Before discussing the implications of this further, it is important to date the accounts in both essay and letter as accurately as possible, since they comprise the record of Thomas's first mature attempt at writing poetry.³⁷ The date of the essay, 'Insomnia', remains unknown, although it appears to have been written at some point between 1910 and 1917.³⁸ However, the letter, although undated, was almost certainly written in the later months of 1913. It was written on notepaper headed 'Selsfield House', and in the Bodleian manuscripts it is filed between letters dated end of October 1913 and 2 January 1914, a period when Thomas was staying at Selsfield House. However, a more likely date for the letter lies between 5 and 13 September 1913, since both the letter and the essay refer to the month of September, and Thomas was also staying at Selsfield House at this time. In addition, in the letter, Thomas's reference to arrangements to meet de la Mare suggest it was written on Sunday, 7 September, the date also mentioned at the end of 'Insomnia': 'And so I fell asleep again on the seventh of September'.³⁹

Thomas records his first successfully completed poems as having

all been written since November [1914]. I had done no verses before and did not expect to and merely became nervous when I thought of beginning.

³⁶ Thomas, 'Insomnia', in *The Last Sheaf*, pp. 39-43; Thomas to de la Mare, Bodleian, MS Eng lett c 376, Letters to Walter de la Mare, folio 221. For the relevant passages, see Appendix C.

³⁷ In the *Collected Poems* (1978), R. G. Thomas includes some of Thomas's adolescent verse as examples of early attempts at composing poetry. He dates Thomas's initial decision to abandon verse-making as about 1899, although he also records Thomas's last early attempt at verse as being the pseudo translation in *Beautiful Wales* in 1905. See *CP*, pp. 454-9.

³⁸ The front inside cover of *The Last Sheaf* records that these pieces were 'contributed to critical journals in the two or three years that preceded his [Thomas's] death'. See also R. G. Thomas, *Portrait*, p. 239, which refers to 'straightforward journalistic pieces, and others written between January 1913 and April 1915 (available in *The Last Sheaf*)'. However, at least one piece in *The Last Sheaf*, 'Great Possessions', was published in *The Tramp* as early as April 1910, cited in Richard Emeny, ed., *Edward Thomas 1878-1917: Towards a complete checklist of his publications* (Blackburn: White Sheep Press, 2004), p. 53.

³⁹ This letter to de la Mare was written on a Friday or Sunday (the handwriting is unclear). Thomas stayed at Selsfield House from Friday 5th September till Saturday 13th September, as is made clear in letters to Farjeon in *Last Four Years*, pp. 25-31. In the letter to de la Mare, Thomas informs him that 'this address [Selsfield House] will most likely find me till Saturday morning'. Since he does not feel the need to specify which Saturday, the letter was probably not written on Friday 5th September. His words also suggest that the date of the letter is a few days earlier than Saturday, not the day before, because he does not use the word 'tomorrow', so Friday 12th is ruled out. Sunday 7th September, therefore, seems the most likely date, a conclusion that is corroborated by the date mentioned in 'Insomnia', 'the seventh of September'.

But when it came to beginning I slipped into it naturally whatever the results.⁴⁰

However, de la Mare's biographer, Theresa Whistler, suggests he may have been attempting poetry as early as August 1914, citing a letter to de la Mare of that date in which Thomas records: 'I write what I can. But no publisher editor or public is concerned.'⁴¹ The content of 'Insomnia' and the letter to de la Mare indicate there was at least one earlier unsuccessful attempt.

That the experiences behind such early efforts should have been relayed to de la Mare is no surprise, since Thomas was in the habit of sharing his writing ideas with him. Once, they agreed to write stories on the same topic of time.⁴² In another letter to de la Mare, Thomas concludes an account of waking from a dream with the words 'this is my copyright', indicating his awareness of the creative potential of such accounts of stories related to sleep, and his readiness to share them, temporarily at least, with de la Mare.⁴³ Thomas also had a high regard for de la Mare as a poet, later rating him 'second [to Frost] among all living poets', and particularly esteeming his *Peacock Pie*, which he had been reading in the summer of 1913.⁴⁴ So Thomas's circumspection in the letter about his own poetic attempt is in keeping with the fact that at that time he was in awe of de la Mare's poetic gift. This is also suggested in the letter itself in his description of de la Mare, in a rephrasing of Pope's words, as one of those

mob of gentlemen that rhyme
with ease .⁴⁵

The spacing of Thomas's idiosyncratic handwriting, approximated in print in the above quotation, ensures that the word 'rhyme', which Thomas specifically selects as a replacement for Pope's 'wrote', is placed at the end of the line, and that the word

⁴⁰ Thomas to W. H. Hudson, *Edward Thomas Fellowship Newsletter* 52, August 2004, p. 11 (18 March 1915).

⁴¹ Theresa Whistler, *Imagination of the Heart: The Life of Walter de la Mare* (London: Duckworth, 1993), p. 235.

⁴² Theresa Whistler, p. 280; see Thomas, 'The time deposit', *The Nation*, 9 (1911), 703-705, reprinted in *Cloud Castle and other Papers* (London: Duckworth, 1922) as 'Saved time'; see also De la Mare, 'The Vats', in *The Riddle and other stories* (London: Selwyn & Blount, 1923), pp. 295-303.

⁴³ Thomas to de la Mare, Bodleian, MS Eng lett c 376, Letters to Walter de la Mare, folio 110 (29 March 1911).

⁴⁴ Theresa Whistler, p. 220; see also *Last Four Years*, p. 36; also, Thomas to de la Mare, Bodleian, MS Eng lett c 376, Letters to Walter de la Mare, folio 206 (18 September 1913).

⁴⁵ Bodleian, MS Eng lett c 376, Letters to Walter de la Mare, folio 221. The spaces in this quotation are an attempt to represent Thomas's own peculiar handwritten spacing. For examples of other specimens of Thomas's original handwriting, see Appendix C.2 and Chapter Three, Appendix G.

'gentlemen' is isolated. The positioning of 'rhyme' adds significance to this act of composing a poem, and the framing of 'gentlemen' between two spaces places emphasis on the suggestion that such poets form a group from which Thomas excludes himself.⁴⁶ He amplifies this sense in an earlier letter to Bottomley, in which he writes: 'By comparison with others that I know – like de la Mare – I seem essentially like the other men in the train & I should like not to be.'⁴⁷ However, his use of Pope's words at this point, some four years after the letter to Bottomley, suggests a greater degree of confidence in his own writing, since, rather than denigrating it completely, he merely differentiates it from the writing of de la Mare.

Thomas's awareness of the significance of this early attempt at composing poetry is further indicated in the graphology of the letter in which it is described. He places brackets around the words 'for the first time'. Also, the positioning of 'trying' at the end of the page delays the crucial word 'rhyme' - which, significantly, rhymes with 'the first time' - to the following sheet. The result is to emphasise both the importance to Thomas of this attempt at poetic composition and the difficulty he experiences with it. The dramatic delay of this first mention of 'rhyme' is strengthened by the fact that when it finally appears, Thomas underlines it:

I found
 myself (for the first time) trying //
 hard to rhyme my mood &
 failing very badly indeed , in
 fact comically so ,⁴⁸

So, as if to reiterate the importance of this attempt, both uses of the word 'rhyme' in the letter occur in emphatic positions, either at the end of a line, or underlined near the start of a new page.

A similar description of the first moments of attempting to write a poem also appears in 'Insomnia'. The details of the setting match those in the letter. However, the account in 'Insomnia' links the experience of composing and the conditions in which it takes place more closely. The passage referring to the composing process begins with a description of the writer's experience of the external environment. He is listening to the song of a robin, and it is his attempts first to avoid and then to record that sound that appear to trigger the composing process:

⁴⁶ The original line is 'The Mob of Gentlemen who wrote with Ease', in Alexander Pope, *The First Epistle of the Second Book of Horace, imitated* (London: Cooper, 1737), p. 7.

⁴⁷ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 196 (14 December 1909).

⁴⁸ Author's spacing.

I strove to escape out of that harmony of bird, wind, and man. But as fast as I made my mind a faintly heaving, shapeless, grey blank, some form or colour appeared; memory or anticipation was at work.

Gradually I found myself trying to understand this dawn harmony. I vowed to remember it and ponder it in the light of day. To make sure of remembering I tried putting it into rhyme.⁴⁹

The experience of listening to this song both initiates the activity of composing and provides a subject for it. Equally, when, a little later in the account in 'Insomnia', the composing process fails, the distance between the experience of the environment and the articulation of it in poetry is emphasised by the fact that the aborted poem fails to contain a single reference to birdsong. Instead, its three lines consist of

The seventh of September

and

The sere and the ember
Of the year and of me.

A possible relation between success in composing and the extent to which a piece retains a reference to the external environment in which it occurs is suggested by the fact that the eventual three lines no longer carry such a reference.

As in many other instances in Thomas's writing, in this description of an emerging poem, the external environment is represented by birdsong. His frequent allusions both to the distance and to the possibility of connection between birdsong and human language reiterate his sense of the importance of the relation of the environment to the process of composing, and of the need for the writer to make efforts to maintain that relation. An early letter of his, for example, emphasises the inaccessibility of birdsong:

I enjoy the songs of birds at times, but not often: I never could enjoy them much, though doubtless they have combined with other things to cause my delights; perhaps my surroundings are too imperfect for it; but more likely I am incapable of it.⁵⁰

Later, however, he refers to birdsong as if it were a language, although still retaining awareness of the distance between it and human language. This occurs in his poem '2 Merfyn', when a thrush's song is described both as a vernacular language and as an inaccessible language in the phrase 'proverbs untranslatable' (*CP*, 293). Another

⁴⁹ See Appendix C.3.

⁵⁰ *Letters to Helen*, p. 1 (21 June 1897).

example occurs in the fourth stanza of 'An Old Song [2]', set in the fading light of dusk that threatens oblivion:

The sailors' song of merry loving
With dusk and sea-gull's mewing
Mixed sweet, the lewdness far outweighed
By the wild charm the chorus played. (CP, 55)

The sounds of human singing and the 'sea-gull's mewing' are combined, 'mixed sweet'. This leads to Longley's interpretation of these lines as art that has become 'inseparable from Nature', art being represented by the sailors' song.⁵¹ However, Thomas's example of human song in 'An Old Song [2]', which is itself based on an old traditional song, is a generic sailors' song of 'lewdness' that is 'far outweighed' by the 'wild charm' of the birds' chorus. Such detail undermines Longley's reading, reversing it to suggest, as Harry Coombes phrases it when commenting on the robin's song in 'Insomnia', a 'sense of the alien' in nature.⁵² Whichever reading is adopted, however, the emphasis remains on the extent of the connection between human composition, particularly of vernacular song, and the environment, as represented by birdsong.

In his prose piece 'A Group of Statuary', first published in 1910, Thomas also explores birdsong as a way of articulating the uneasy relationship between the human voice, and by implication the woman who possesses that voice, and its environment. He describes 'a lovely woman living among mountain lakes', whose eyes 'were like wild-voiced nightingales in their silence', a silence imposed upon them by their present 'imprisonment' in the urban 'cage' of London.⁵³ This woman is reminiscent of W. H. Hudson's bird-girl in his novel *Green Mansions: A Romance of the Tropical Forest*, a novel that Thomas had previously reviewed as 'one of the noblest pieces of self-expression'.⁵⁴ Hudson's bird-girl can communicate with birds as well as people. He names her 'Rima'. The evocation in this name of the word 'rhyme' suggests the high value that Hudson places on the power of poetry as a means of connecting with the environment. In his review of *Green Mansions*, Thomas emphasises the power of communication that Rima possesses. He writes that 'her singing was a mode of

⁵¹ Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, p. 60.

⁵² Harry Coombes, *Edward Thomas: A Critical Study* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1956; repr. 1973), p. 92.

⁵³ 'A Group of Statuary', in *Light and Twilight* (London: Duckworth, 1911), pp. 10-34, (p. 19).

⁵⁴ 'A Romance of Nature', *Daily Chronicle*, 1 March 1904, p. 3. See W. H. Hudson, *Green Mansions: A Romance of the Tropical Forest* (London: Duckworth, 1904, repr. 1911), pp. 112-3.

expression which Nature had taught her. It was attuned to the voices of animals and birds and waters and winds among the leaves; it was more a universal language than Latin or English'. The close connection she enjoys with birdsong, however, is contrasted with her uneasy relationship with humans and the human voice. Unlike the facility with which she communicates with her natural environment, Rima finds communication with human beings limited and unsatisfactory, and, after venturing out of her forest habitat into the world of men, is fatally silenced on her return. In this story, Hudson implies a doubt as to how far the environment, represented by birdsong, can be connected, or 'translated', into human speech or poetry. Thomas explores this further in the fate he gives to his own bird-woman in 'A Group of Statuary'. In Thomas's description of this woman's impoverished existence in an urban setting he emphasises how she has been forgotten and overlooked. She is described as a statue and, Thomas writes, 'no one notices the statuary of London'. This fate is re-enacted in the way he continues his image of her eyes speaking like nightingales with the words 'but in this cage ...', suggesting that divorce from that natural environment results in a loss of the power to articulate or to be heard.⁵⁵

Connecting with Oral Literature

[The Forest miners] singing their yearning hymns through
the dark, wet woods on their way home.⁵⁶

Dennis Potter

As Thomas indicates in his use of images such as 'proverbs untranslatable' in '2 Merfyn' (*CP*, 293) to describe birdsong, the ballads, songs, proverbs and stories of oral tradition provide crucial links between the physical environment and the written text of poetry. These connections are prized by Thomas. He sees them as a means of invigorating imaginative writing, exclaiming: 'Can [the recovery of old ballads] possibly give a vigorous impulse to a new school of poetry?'⁵⁷

⁵⁵ *Light*, p. 21, p. 19.

⁵⁶ Cited in Roy Palmer, *The Folklore of Gloucestershire* (Launceston: Westcountry Books, 1994), p. 228.

⁵⁷ Thomas, *The South Country* (London: Dent, 1909), p. 241. Where appropriate, further references to this edition, abbreviated to *SC*, will be given in parentheses after quotations in the text.

returning to the old lore

weather rhymes
Which others spoilt⁵⁸
Edward Thomas

To put Thomas's beliefs concerning the importance of oral tradition in context, it is worth referring to the work of Linda Dowling. In *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*, Dowling, with reference to the nineteenth century, connects growing doubts about the imaginative life of English literary language with contemporary developments in comparative philology. She refers to the 'fin de siècle linguistic self-consciousness as it floated between the artificial dialect of literature and the "barbaric yawp" of vernacular speech', and writes:

Spoken dialects, that is to say, not only more perfectly reflected language reality than did written languages; they also persisted in their linguistic purity, whereas written languages, already falsified by orthography, compounded their falsity by incorporating the vogue words and constructions of civilized fashion. Thus did nineteenth-century linguistic science end by fully ratifying Wordsworth's belief in rural speech as the real language of men, and by deeply undermining Coleridge's idea of literature and the literary dialect as a *lingua communis*.⁵⁹

Thomas also adopted these beliefs, focusing, in his later writing, on casting off the literary conventions he had inherited, described by him as 'the "glory of words" which is the modern poet's embarrassing heritage'.⁶⁰ His preference for the spoken vernacular and oral traditions also reflects the ratification of William Wordsworth's belief in rural speech, as recorded by Dowling. Thomas's dissatisfaction with the 'glory of words' was shared by many writers of his time, and, in particular, by the Modernists. The extent of Thomas's exposure to contemporary Modernist movements is nowhere better indicated than in the fact that a series of his poetry reviews appear in an issue of *Poetry and Drama*. The opening article of this issue announces that 'we claim ourselves, also, to be futurists', and the issue itself is devoted largely to a celebration of Futurism in its focus on the dynamic energy of new technology. Although Thomas's reviews immediately follow an article on Futurism by the Imagist poet, F. S. Flint, and although he echoes the dissatisfaction with poetic traditions expressed in other articles in the issue, Thomas does not declare an affinity with this

⁵⁸ 'Lob', *CP*, p. 165.

⁵⁹ Dowling, p. 214, p. 83.

⁶⁰ *English Review*, August 1914, cited in *A language not to be betrayed: selected prose of Edward Thomas*, ed. by Edna Longley (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1981), p. 130. Longley's book is hereafter referred to as *A language*.

movement.⁶¹ Instead, he expresses his dissatisfaction by recalling a pre-Romantic flexibility. In one of these reviews, for example, he evokes 'what poetry was before Keats and Tennyson had so adorned it that it could run and sing too seldom'.⁶²

About six months later, he reiterates his dissatisfaction on a more personal level, with reference to his own writing, in a letter to Robert Frost. He writes of wanting 'to begin over again with them [his ideas about speech and literature] & wring the necks of my rhetoric - the geese'.⁶³ In order to 'begin over again', Thomas turns to the unwritten vernacular of popular songs and proverbs, and to the calls or song, not of domiciled farmyard geese or caged nightingales, but of birds in their natural wild environment, like those in the dawn chorus recorded in 'Insomnia'. He sees both the sounds of the environment and the vernacular of oral tradition as crucial preconditions of the composing process, particularly in view of the literary context within which he is writing.

So Thomas, in the context of his time, sees himself as alienated not only from wild birdsong but also from the vernacular with which birdsong, as suggested earlier, has an uneasy but crucial relationship. He borrows from Turgenev the term 'superfluous man' (*SC*, 6), and applies it to himself, born in the suburbs, cut off from the rural countryside and from his indigenous Welsh roots.⁶⁴ However, his attention remains on reclaiming that vernacular. His brother, Julian Thomas, reports, for example, of Thomas's Wordsworthian ambition to produce 'prose, as he said to me shortly after he had finished his critical study of Walter Pater, "as near akin as possible to the talk of a Surrey peasant"'.⁶⁵

Thomas's acute awareness of the growing inaccessibility of vernacular speech in his time is articulated in an early essay, in which he writes of an old countryman:

He certainly had no intention of allowing the old lore concerning herbs to die out. Dried specimens of any sort were always kept by him and roots of many more. Such knowledge as he was full of is fast decaying.⁶⁶

⁶¹ 'Futurism', *Poetry and Drama*, 1.3 (September, 1913), 262; also, F. S. Flint, 'The French Chronicle', 357-362; and three poetry reviews by Edward Thomas in 'Reviews', 363-366, 370-71.

⁶² Thomas's review of *Eve and other Poems* by Ralph Hodgson in 'Reviews', *Poetry and Drama*, 1.3 (September, 1913), 370-71 (p. 371).

⁶³ *Elected Friends: R.F. & E.T.*, p. 10 (19 May 1914).

⁶⁴ Thomas's use of the term 'superfluous man' is discussed extensively by Stan Smith, *Edward Thomas* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 47, p. 48 and passim; see also Piers Gray, *Marginal Men: Edward Thomas, Ivor Gurney, J. R. Ackerley* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 8-36.

⁶⁵ Recorded by Julian Thomas in the preface to Edward Thomas, *The Childhood of Edward Thomas: a fragment of autobiography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1938), p. 8.

⁶⁶ 'Dad', written in 1895, cited in R. G. Thomas, *Portrait*, p. 15.

The preface to *Norse Tales*, his collection of rewritten oral stories stresses the threat of extinction that faces stories in the oral tradition, and the implied role his books play in reclaiming these stories. He also highlights in this preface the close connection between such stories and the environment in which they were originally composed.

He observes:

These stories are taken from poems in the Old Norse tongue. They are the work of men who were perhaps for the most part Christians, living in the ninth and tenth centuries amidst a still keen aroma and tradition of Paganism. Their names have been lost, their poems confused and mutilated, in the course of a thousand years. Even the land where they wrote is unknown, and scholars have tried to discover it from the nature of the landscape and the conditions of life mentioned in the poems.⁶⁷

As a result, Thomas argues that in anthologies of verse ‘room should be found for songs, epitaphs, nursery rhymes, popular verse’, and he does this in his own anthologies.⁶⁸ In addition, he employs vigorous efforts in reclamation of the vernacular by his scrupulous use of vernacular in preference to Latin terms in his references to flora and fauna. Related to this effort is his record and celebration of the neglected and under-farmed countryside of the rapidly urbanising Edwardian England in which he lived, which, despite that neglect, represents a long history of close human contact with the land and a corresponding reflection of this in rural speech. Thomas’s writing on this, however, as Stan Smith notes, is particularly focused on the impending loss of that world, poised on the brink of extinction, just like the vernacular that spoken within it. As Smith puts it,

the rundown of the land, the demoralization of the farmers, and the poverty of the agricultural labourers, now the lowest paid of any large category of workers, created that landscape of picturesque abandon which is recognizably Thomas’s own.⁶⁹

Thomas’s efforts at reclamation of the vernacular are also manifested in his activities as compiler, editor, rewriter and recorder of oral traditions, myth, legend and song, and his scrupulous use of indigenous plant names.⁷⁰ These acts of reclamation suggest that inaccessibility to birdsong and the environment is a phenomenon of the

⁶⁷ *Norse Tales* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), preface, p. 3.

⁶⁸ ‘Anthologies and Reprints’, *Poetry and Drama*, 2.8 (December, 1914), 384-488 (p. 387).

⁶⁹ Smith, p. 30.

⁷⁰ See, for example, *Four-and-Twenty Blackbirds* (London: Duckworth, 1915), *Celtic Stories* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911) and *Norse Tales*; Thomas’s introductions to *Zincali* by George Borrow, and *Words and Places in Illustration of History, Ethnology and Geography*, by Isaac Taylor (London: Dent, 1911); his anthologies *This England: An Anthology from her Writers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1915) and *The Flowers I Love* (London: Jack, 1916); and his edition of *The Book of the Open Air*.

present, when 'most of us know only a few of these unspoken languages of the past, and only a few words in each' (*SC*, 150), and is not a phenomenon of the past nor, necessarily, a permanent condition. Thomas interprets this inaccessibility as a loss in understanding. He sets it within the context of the span of a human life, depicting children as inhabiting, in a way an adult cannot, the nameless and 'untranslatable' natural world, as if that world represents a kind of Eden which adults have left behind. In his poem 'The Brook', for example, Thomas represents a Blakean innocence in his description of a child living and directly participating in her environment. She is able to 'translate' her experience and put it into words in a way the adult in the poem cannot.

Thomas's poem 'Home [2]' suggests that the extent of human understanding of the natural environment can be measured in terms of the extent of sustained contact with the land. The narrator, described as a continual traveller - 'often I had gone this way before' - achieves a momentary absorption in the natural world:

one nationality
We had, I and the birds that sang,
One memory. (*CP*, 177)

However, he cannot articulate this experience, remaining caught in it, unable, like the birds themselves, to distinguish the end of the song:

as he ended, on the elm
Another had but just begun
His last; they knew no more than I
The day was done.

The narrator's experience is contrasted with the skilled and aware activity of a labourer. The sound of this man's sawing translates and completes not only the narrator's experience of the birdsong but the whole poem: 'The sound of sawing rounded all.' The poem makes clear that the man lives and works locally. He inhabits the land in the way the narrator, a passing traveller, does not. His sawing, therefore, can be seen as an approximation to a local vernacular, having the power to 'speak' with and complete the birds' songs that overwhelm the narrator. As Jonathan Bate describes it, the labourer presents a 'relationship with earthly things that is turned into language by the poetry of dwelling'.⁷¹

In Thomas's work, he views the beginning of the poem as lying in the environment, often represented by birdsong. The link between this song and human

⁷¹ Bate, p. 280.

attempts at composition is formed in his poems by the vernacular and by the activities of local rural inhabitants. It is also formed by the voices of the young in, for example, his poems 'The Mill-Pond' and 'The Brook'. Significantly, just prior to the onset of his mature verse, Thomas's writing begins to connect more closely with the voices and perceptions of children. He shows great interest in his youngest daughter Myfanwy's early attempts at speech and articulation, an interest later reflected in his poems 'Old Man', 'Snow white bird' and 'Out in the dark'.⁷² In addition, in early 1913, he begins work on a project that coincides with his developing close friendship with the children's writer, Eleanor Farjeon. This project involves the rewriting of vernacular proverbs to form a series of stories based on a literal reading of the images they contain. Some of these were initially told by Thomas and his wife to their own children. They were later published as *Four-and-Twenty Blackbirds*. This project was encouraged by Farjeon, and by de la Mare who also wrote for children and whose *Peacock Pie* was at that time being avidly read not only by Thomas's children but by Thomas himself.⁷³ Deborah Thacker has argued that Thomas, by interpreting the *Blackbirds* proverbs literally rather than metaphorically, 'undermines the authority of a moralising adult voice and, through entering into a playful relationship with the child-as-reader', challenges language as 'a socialising and controlling force'. She claims that such 'childlike uses of language and the childlike studied misapprehension or "play"' with language reflected in these children's stories feed into and influence Thomas's poetry.⁷⁴ R. G. Thomas argues similarly, suggesting that Thomas's intense 'desire to be "non-literary"' that manifests itself in his focus on the vernacular and the voices of children helps to release his poetry.⁷⁵ Thomas himself shows awareness of a connection between *Blackbirds* and his poetry in a comment he makes on 'Lob', a poem that, as Farjeon records, was 'very close to his heart'. Thomas writes to her that 'I wish I had gone on where the Proverbs left off. Probably I never shall, unless "Lob" is the beginning.'⁷⁶

⁷² R. G. Thomas, *Portrait*, p. 238; see also Thomas to John Freeman, British Library, Letters to John Freeman, MS RP 1791, folio 20 (14 August 1914).

⁷³ *Last Four Years*, p. 6; Thomas to de la Mare, Bodleian, Letters to Walter de la Mare, MS Eng lett c 376, folio 198 (postmarked 29 June 1913).

⁷⁴ Deborah Thacker, 'Robert Frost and Edward Thomas: poets' stories', in *Studies in Children's Literature, 1500-2000*, ed. by Celia Keenan and Mary Shine Thompson (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), pp. 86-93. (p. 88, p. 89).

⁷⁵ *Portrait*, pp. 308-9.

⁷⁶ *Last Four Years*, p. 173, p. 172 (postmarked 28 November 1915).

So, just as the experience of listening to the robin's song in 'Insomnia' leads to the composition of a rhyme, the rewriting of vernacular proverbs for children, which is what *Blackbirds* entails, appears to lead to poetry, and particularly to 'Lob', described by Longley as 'unequaled as a poem based upon English mythological material'. In 'Lob', the connection between birds, the vernacular and poetry is made very clear, since at the same time as translating the vernacular into poetry, Thomas also records the translation of birdsong into human language:

Our blackbirds sang no English till his [Lob's] ear
Told him they called his Jan Toy "Pretty dear". (CP, 163)

Longley notes this link when she observes that this passage from 'Lob' 'connects blackbirds, an old proverb, Lob's sweetheart and a dialect poem by Thomas Hardy'.⁷⁷ This instance in 'Lob' is reminiscent of Thomas's use of the 'mixed sweet' sailors' song and sea-gull's 'mewing' in 'An Old Song [2]' (CP, 55). However, in these poems this is not an equal partnership and Thomas emphasises both the pre-linguistic history of the blackbird's song and the belatedness of Lob's act of naming it.

The significance of the poem 'Lob' for Thomas clearly lies in this connection between the song, the poem, the vernacular and the environment. Lob, who has the ability to name, is presented as a timeless figure appearing across generations. He also turns up in various locations in the rural countryside, often as a traveller. In this way, he crosses both temporal and spatial boundaries. Steeped in the vernacular, and in quotations and adaptations from earlier literature, the figure of Lob can be said to represent oral tradition. Even his name is fluid, changing over time just as oral literature transforms itself. In the following lines, not only is Lob referred to by various names, but an allusion is made to the transforming effect of oral tradition in the reference to the spoiling of weather rhymes:

With blue smock and with gold rings in his ears,
Sometimes he is a pedlar, not too poor
To keep his wit. This is tall Tom that bore
The logs in, and with Shakespeare in the hall
Once talked, when icicles hung by the wall.
As Herne the Hunter he has known hard times.
On sleepless nights he made up weather rhymes
Which others spoilt. And, Hob, being then his name,
He kept the hog that thought the butcher came
To bring his breakfast. (CP, 165)

⁷⁷ In Thomas, *Poems and Last Poems*, notes, p. 231, p. 244.

Lob's success in naming birdsong contrasts with Thomas's record of his own early failure to appreciate such song and with the failure in 'Insomnia' to put the robin's song into rhyme. As observed earlier, when the 'Insomnia' poem is cut short, caught in one time, 'the seventh of September', it does not contain any references to the initial inspiration of birdsong.⁷⁸ It only refers to the speaker of the poem. In contrast, the success of 'Lob' lies in the conjunction of the environment, birdsong and plants, which occurs as they are named and renamed by the fluid voice of the anonymous indigenous tradition. The changes in Lob's name, from 'tall Tom' to 'Herne the Hunter' to 'Hob', reach apotheosis at the end of the poem in a litany of names that encompass time and space. These names celebrate folk-heroes, characters in proverbs, indigenous plants, waste or common land, and include what Longley calls a 'roll-call of battles' in which the common soldier has died.⁷⁹ The poem ends:

The man you saw, - Lob-lie-by-the-fire, Jack Cade,
Jack Smith, Jack Moon, poor Jack of every trade,
Young Jack, or old Jack, or Jack What-d'ye-call,
Jack-in-the-hedge, or Robin-run-by-the-wall,
Robin Hood, Ragged Robin, lazy Bob,
One of the lords of No Man's Land, good Lob, -
Although he was seen dying at Waterloo,
Hastings, Agincourt, and Sedgemoor, too, -
Lives yet. (*CP*, 167)

In these lines, Thomas draws together the richness and fluidity of oral tradition, represented by the many different names and guises under which Lob has appeared. By recreating the process that is so essential to this tradition in a printed poem, he not only records that tradition, as he did in his earlier editorial work, but also participates in it, reliving it in process, linking past memories and legends to the present time.

⁷⁸ See Appendix C.3.

⁷⁹ *Poems and Last Poems*, notes, pp. 251-2.

re-inventing the anonymous and the dangers of appropriation

I love a ballad in print, a-life, for then we are sure they are true.⁸⁰

William Shakespeare

In my new robe
This morning –
Someone else.⁸¹

Matsuo Bashō

There is a close relation between the emergence of Thomas's writings and his use of the vernacular as he continues the processes of oral tradition, reusing and retelling proverbs and sayings by weaving them unannounced into his writing as if, as Longley puts it, 'he had invented them'.⁸² As a result, many of what may initially appear to be original turns of phrase can be traced back to previous texts. As his daughter Myfanwy Thomas points out:

Not many people realize the implication of the line 'But if she finds a blossom on furze' and also the line in the poem 'October', 'And gorse that has not time not to be gay'. They have their origins in the country saying, 'When gorse is out of flower then kissing's out of fashion'.⁸³

On the surface, Thomas's appropriation of such material in pieces that carry his name appears to run counter to the tradition of anonymity in oral literature. However, he also extends such anonymity to himself, re-inventing himself and his work as anonymous. He presents, for example, a lyric in his book *Beautiful Wales* as an anonymous translation of what he claims is an authentic Welsh song, crediting this pseudo translation, itself apparently 'imitative' of other Welsh songs, to Llewelyn the Bard. This invention of a Welsh traditional poem places Thomas in a long tradition of mythologizing.⁸⁴ Thomas writes:

Here is one of his [Llewelyn the Bard's] imitative songs, reduced to its lowest terms by a translator:

She is dead, Eluned,
Whom the young men and the old men

⁸⁰ *The Winter's Tale* (London: Methuen, 1914; repr. 1966) iv. 4. 261-2.

⁸¹ *On Love and Barley: Haiku of Bashō*, trans. by Lucian Stryk (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 25. Bashō, a seventeenth-century itinerant monk-like poet, is regarded as the master of haiku, a Japanese poem, consisting of seventeen syllables.

⁸² Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, p. 62.

⁸³ Myfanwy Thomas, *One of these fine days: memoirs* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1982), p. 124; the first line quoted is from *CP*, 'I Bronwen', p. 291.

⁸⁴ For examples of such inaccuracies in the mythologizing process of Welsh history, see Prys Morgan, 'From a Death to a View: The Hunt for the Welsh Past in a Romantic Period', in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 43-99. A number of the claims in this book have themselves been challenged by subsequent scholars. It could be argued that the process of mythologising continues.

And the old women and even the young women
Came to the gates in the village
To see, because she walked as beautifully as a heifer.⁸⁵

When a reader asks him for the original, Thomas is unabashed, writing to Bottomley that: 'To the Cymric enthusiast I only said that there was no Welsh original for 'Eluned' & that therefore he wd be disappointed because anyone can make a pseudo translation that suggests a noble original.'⁸⁶

Thomas's preference for anonymity and for the communality of literature over one individual's claim on a text is also indicated in his exchanges with Bottomley regarding Bottomley's rearrangements of prose versions of Welsh songs into verse for *Beautiful Wales*. At first Thomas informs him that 'your name would be mentioned if you were pleased with the verses.' Later he writes:

I have already planned to use 'The Maid of Llandebie', I mean your translation. Of course it is not you, & it is not the Welsh lyric, but it can be sung & it has already reminded me of the original. Therefore, without your name, but with your apologies, I have inserted it in my 3rd. chapter.⁸⁷

In the final text, Thomas re-invents Bottomley as an anonymous poet, crediting but not naming him with the words: 'Here follows the air and a translation by an English poet.'⁸⁸ When he later apologises to Bottomley for not naming him, he uses the telling excuse that the lines 'were quoted in such intimate relations with the context that it would be difficult for me to mention your name'.⁸⁹ In other words, if he names the poet, he risks alienating the lines from their context. It is significant that these two examples are connected to the Welsh oral tradition, since Thomas viewed himself as 'mainly Welsh' (*SC*, 7) and had a special esteem for Welsh culture. However, he behaves in a similar fashion in other works, as Lucy Newlyn notes: 'Often Thomas quoted without giving any attribution - either to the author or to the quoted work.'⁹⁰ He does this, for example, when quoting from Edmund Gosse in his *Algernon Charles Swinburne: A Critical Study*. Gosse writes of this that Thomas 'is one of those people

⁸⁵ *Beautiful Wales* (London: Black, 1905), p. 82; See Bottomley's comment in *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 125, fn. 3.

⁸⁶ *Letters to Bottomley*, pp. 126-7 (11 November 1906).

⁸⁷ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 67 (1 November 1904); p. 75 (18 January 1905).

⁸⁸ *Beautiful Wales*, pp. 47-8.

⁸⁹ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 79 (27 February 1905).

⁹⁰ Thomas, *Oxford*, ((London: Black, 1903; repr. Oxford: Signal Books, 2005), introduction, p. xlv; see also p. xlvi.

who grudge acknowledgement and he quotes metres of passages from me without mentioning my name. (He does mention it elsewhere.)'⁹¹

Thomas extends this habit of using older material, unacknowledged, in his work to his own earlier texts, which he also reworks into newer pieces. 'Birds in March', possibly his earliest published piece, contains a description of 'a woodland mere' that includes the chilling image of 'bayonet-like reeds'.⁹² In this passage, Thomas writes of 'a moor-hen's nest approaching completion. It is made from bayonet-like reeds and other water plants.' The image resurfaces over twenty years later in 1916 in his poem 'The Pond', which describes

Tall reeds
Like criss-cross bayonets
Where a bird once called (CP, 331)

As in 'Birds in March', the bird in 'The Pond' is a moorhen.

In addition, Thomas's own work has been published either anonymously or under a pseudonym. As a reviewer, this was imposed on him, but he took up the practice by choice with the writing he most valued, his poetry, which he published under a pseudonym in journals, anthologies and as a collection of six poems. He also intended his 1917 collection to be published under the same pseudonym.⁹³ The reason he gives for this, his desire to see if his poems can stand alone apart from his reputation as a prose writer and critic, indicates his awareness of the detrimental effect of naming. Poems are more unequivocally read and valued as poems if no name is attached. In this context, his vigorous editorialising, anthologising and rewriting of vernacular records of the environment, and of other writers' material, suggest attempts to exercise restraint on his own voice and on other named voices in their tendency to individual ownership.

⁹¹ Gosse, BL, Ashley A4474, Letter from Edmund Gosse to T. J. Wise, criticising Edward Thomas's A.C. Swinburne A Critical Study, folio 84/5f (30 November 1912); Alfred Edward Housman also complains of Thomas's laxity as relates to permission to publish and acknowledgement of his poems, writing 'Pray, who gave Mr E. Thomas leave to print two of my inspired lays in his and your *Pocket Book of Poems and Songs?* I didn't' and 'Mr Thomas thanks me for "a poem", and prints two: which is the one he doesn't thank me for?' Housman to Grant Richards, cited Henry Maas, ed., *The Letters of A. E. Housman* (London: Hart-Davis, 1971), p. 91 (29 June 1907).

⁹² 'Birds in March', in 'The First Published Writing by Edward Thomas?', *Edward Thomas Fellowship Newsletter*, 53 (January 2005), 11-13 (p. 13) (first publ. in *Young Days* journal of Sunday School Association, February 1895).

⁹³ His poetry appears under the pseudonym of Edward Eastaway in three volumes of the periodical *Root and Branch*, 4 (1915), 59-60, n.s. 2 (1917), 32, n.s. 4 (1918), 67-9, in *Form*, 1 (1916), 33-4, and in *Poetry*, 9 (1917), 247-250; in the anthology *An Annual of New Poetry* (London: Constable, 1917) and in Thomas's own anthology *This England: An Anthology from her writers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1915), pp. 111-2; and as *Six Poems* (Flansham: Pear Tree Press, 1916; repr. Cheltenham: Cyder Press, 2005).

Thomas's preference for the anonymity of a fluid oral tradition is confirmed and further explained in his introduction to Isaacs' *Words and Places in Illustration of History, Ethnology and Geography*. Place-names are particularly significant for Thomas. As acts of naming the environment, they usually precede written attempts to describe that environment. Therefore, they tend to remain closer to that environment than prose descriptions, and, in them, names, the environment and oral tradition coincide. In his introduction to *Words and Places*, Thomas praises those who give inaccurate etymological histories for traditional place-names. He writes that such men 'made England great, fearing neither man nor God nor philology', and also states: 'Better pure imagination than rash science in handling place names.'⁹⁴ He emphasises the reductive effect of giving place-names finite histories and definitions, and declares his own preference for the inaccuracy of 'a thousand errors so long as they are human' (SC, 148). Such inaccuracy, for Thomas, reflects the names themselves. He explores this inherent inaccuracy in relation to names of plants in his poem 'Old Man'. These names 'half decorate, half perplex, the thing it is' (CP, 19). He emphasises this further in 'Old Man' by listing several possible ways of describing the plant, 'old man', but omitting in this list any mention of the plant's Latin classification, *Artemisia abrotanum*. In this way, he challenges the ambition of taxonomy to classify definitively.

In this consideration of the connection between the environment, oral literature and imaginative writing, it is apposite to examine the late writings of Virginia Woolf, who dealt with very similar issues to those addressed by Thomas. F. R. Leavis noted this when he wrote that 'Edward Thomas's concern with the outer scene is akin to Mrs Woolf's'.⁹⁵ Woolf's high regard for Thomas is initially documented in a review she wrote of his *A Literary Pilgrim in England* in 1917. She concluded the review with the words:

We have seldom read a book indeed which gives a better feeling of England than this one. Never perfunctory or conventional, but always saying what strikes him as the true or interesting or characteristic thing, Mr. Thomas brings the very look of the fields and roads before us; he brings the poets too; and no one will finish the book without a sense that he [*sic*] knows and respects the author.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ *Words and Places*, cited in *A language*, pp. 213-4.

⁹⁵ *New Bearings in English Poetry*, 2nd edn (London: Chatto & Windus, 1950), p. 70.

⁹⁶ 'Flumina Amem Silvasque', *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 October 1917, p. 489.

Over twenty years later, in the initial draft of her last novel, *Between the Acts*, she directly mentions Thomas's 'Old Man'. An allusion to the poem still remains in the completed novel, which includes a passage in which Isa 'stripped the bitter leaf that grew, as it happened, outside the nursery window, Old Man's Beard. Shrivelling the shreds in lieu of words, for no words grow there, nor roses either.'⁹⁷ Thus, like Thomas in 'Old Man', Woolf also explores the relationship between names and things. In 'Anon', which Woolf was working on at the same time as *Between the Acts*, she appears to recall Thomas's 'Insomnia' when she presents birdsong as the precursor to the human voice. However, whereas 'Insomnia' focuses on a single instance, Woolf looks at the wider historical context, describing how birdsong develops into the anonymous vernacular of folk-song:

Innumerable birds sang; but their song was only heard by a few skin clad hunters in the clearings. Did the desire to sing come to one of those huntsmen because he heard the birds sing, and so rested his axe against the tree for a moment?⁹⁸

Woolf, like Thomas, also recognises the importance of the anonymous voice. In *A Room of One's Own*, she writes of Chaucer's dependence on 'those forgotten poets who paved the ways and tamed the natural savagery of the tongue'.⁹⁹ She also clearly articulates the dangers inherent in naming an author and in printing a work. These dangers are implied by Thomas too, not simply in his desire for a pseudonym for his poetry, but also in the poems themselves, such as the lane in his poem 'Bob's Lane', which, when named, has already lost its use, partly because of that act of naming. However, for Woolf, writing in a period of increased upheaval in the late 1930s and early 1940s at the onset of a second world war, these dangers are more explicit.¹⁰⁰ In 'Anon', she refers to *Morte d'Arthur*, the first printed text, as a symbol of printed literature and as an example of the fixing effect of print, similar to the

⁹⁷ Woolf, *Between the Acts* (London: Hogarth Press, 1941), p. 243; also, p. 134, p. 136, p. 181, p. 215. See also Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), pp. 376-8. Thomas also used the title 'Between the Acts' for Chapter 23 in his *George Borrow: the Man and His Books*. This chapter follows on from a chapter entitled '“The Bible in Spain”' and precedes '“Lavengro”' and '“The Romany Rye”'. As mentioned earlier, in his critical work on George Borrow, Thomas stresses the close relation between the environment and Borrow's writing in *The Bible in Spain*. As Chapter Five discusses, he also highlights the particular relation of gypsies with the environment, both in his comments on Borrow's work and in his own poem 'The Gypsy'. Similarly, Woolf's *Between the Acts* deals with the relation between the environment and the human voice and creative writing.

⁹⁸ 'Anon', p. 382.

⁹⁹ *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929), p. 98.

¹⁰⁰ Woolf was working on *Between the Acts* between 1938-1941, and 'Anon' between 1940-1941.

fixing quality of taxonomy that Thomas disliked. Woolf also stresses the fatal effect of print on the anonymous voice. She writes:

It was the printing press that finally was to kill Anon. But it was the press also that preserved him. When in 1477 Caxton printed the twenty one books of the *Morte d'Arthur* he fixed the voice of Anon for ever. There we tap the reservoir of common belief that lay deep sunk in the minds of peasants and nobles. There in Malory's [sic] pages we hear the voice of Anon murmuring still.¹⁰¹

The affinity between Thomas and Woolf is further demonstrated by the fact that Thomas also takes Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* as his representative printed text. In 'Reading out of doors', he uses it to show how, instead of the writer attempting to subsume the environment in words, words can be subsumed in the environment. Thomas writes of how the sounds of nature not only complement but redress the flaws of *Morte d'Arthur* when it is read out of doors:

Immediately it is on the grass, the wood sorcery catches it. The birds fill with their softest notes the pauses of his halting stories. The flowers and the trees are glad to find the place in these stories, which Malory rarely gave to them.¹⁰²

So, both Woolf and Thomas connect the act of printing a text with a sense of loss. In Woolf's case, the act of writing and remembering is also linked to death. It depends upon the passing of what it records, and it kills 'Anon'. W. H. Hudson, too, suggests this in the fate he gives Rima in *Green Mansions*. In the wildness of the forest, Rima shimmers in 'iridescent glory', but, when seen in human habitats, she appears 'like some common dull-plumaged little bird sitting in a cage'.¹⁰³ Seduced from her forest, she is eventually burnt to death. All that remains of her is an urn made by the narrator, who carves on it a textual inscription. This is, as Thomas notes in his review of *Green Mansions*, 'an imperishable and sacred memory', but it is also a reminder of what has perished.¹⁰⁴ The inscription reads '*Sin vos y siu dios y mi*', translated in the novel as 'I, no longer I, in a universe where *she* was not, and God was not'.¹⁰⁵ The urn and the epitaph, while acting as remembrances of the girl, also stress the irrevocability of death. The 'I' who carved the inscription is 'no longer I'.

The implication for all three writers, Woolf, Hudson and Thomas, is that the act of writing words down, and, in Hudson's case, the act of speaking as an individual

¹⁰¹ 'Anon', p. 384.

¹⁰² 'Reading out of doors', *Atlantic Monthly*, 92, p. 277.

¹⁰³ *Green Mansions*, p. 97; see also Bate, pp. 55-62.

¹⁰⁴ *Daily Chronicle*, 1 March 1904, p. 3.

¹⁰⁵ Hudson, *Green Mansions*, p. 297.

human voice, is an act that coincides with, involves and even causes creative loss. At the same time, Woolf and Thomas also celebrate the printed book: in Thomas's case, because it allows space for the environment to have a voice, and in Woolf's because it preserves a space in which anonymous voices can speak. Even the narrator of *Green Mansions* finds some form of consolation in the written inscription which he not only creates verbally but physically carves on the urn.

Woolf's more explicit rendering of the tensions that exist between anonymous and named printed text are expressed by Thomas in his comparisons of adult human voices with voices of unnamed and unself-conscious children. As noted earlier, Thomas presents children as closely connected with their environment, inhabiting it in a way that is in some senses evocative of Hudson's Rima. This is in contrast to adult writers, who tend to act as observers. In Thomas's 'Old Man', for example, the child is merely, effortlessly, 'perhaps / Thinking, perhaps of nothing' in the environment, while the more detached adult narrator is intent on trying 'to think what it is I am remembering' (CP, 19). In Thomas's 'The Mill-Pond' and 'The Brook', the voices of a child and a young girl have powerful effects. While the adult narrator observes and muses on the natural scene, these younger voices suddenly translate the scene into speech. In similar passages in Woolf's *Between the Acts*, the wind interrupts the performance of an outdoor play. She writes: 'Then the wind rose, and in the rustle of the leaves even the great words became inaudible; and the audience sat staring at the villagers, whose mouths opened, but no sound came.' The sound is then taken up by the bellowing of cows. In both Woolf and Thomas, the interruption is violent and unexpected. In Woolf's novel, the wind rises and the cows bellow. The speaker in Thomas's 'The Mill-Pond' is 'startled' by the girl's voice (CP, 89) and becomes angry. Then, as if in response to his anger, and to the building tension, he goes on to relate how a 'storm burst' in the natural world (CP, 91). In 'The Brook', the child's voice 'raised the dead', and was able to express, as the narrator observes at the end of the poem,

What I felt, yet never should have found
A word for, while I gathered sight and sound. (CP, 231)

However, these voices raise rather than destroy the dead. They speak without risking the dangers of appropriation identified by Woolf in her reference to Caxton's printing press in 'Anon'. In contrast to the fixing effect of the printing press, in the novel *Between the Acts*, Woolf's cows, after bellowing, 'lowered their heads, and began

browsing', unaware of the contrivances that the human actors and director labour over in their outdoor play and of the audience's strain to interpret these.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, as indicated above, in both Thomas's 'The Mill-Pond' and 'The Brook' open with the narrator watching and describing the scene, collecting rather than participating in the 'sight and sound' surrounding him. On the other hand, the child and girl in these poems are part of the land, participating in it. In 'The Brook', the child is paddling in the water. When, in 'The Mill-Pond', the narrator puts his feet near the water, he does not enter it: 'my feet dangling teased the foam/ That slid below'. Significantly, it is at this point of refusal to enter the water that a girl, dressed in white as if to imply a relation between her communion with the land and innocence, is introduced with the words 'came out'. These words suggest that she is issuing directly out of the landscape. Her ambiguous warning 'Take care!' highlights the narrator's situation, poised on the brink, risking either alienation as a detached spectator, or loss of individuality if he should absorb himself in the landscape by dipping his feet in the dangerous mill-water. The term 'landscape' is here used advisedly in order to indicate a view of the land, presented in part by the speaker of the poem, the adult narrator, and altered by the speaker within the poem, the girl.

language of the land

Nature, that universal and publick Manuscript that lies
expanded unto the Eyes of all.¹⁰⁷

Thomas Browne

A dolmen rises out of the wheat in one field, like a
quotation from an unknown language.¹⁰⁸

Edward Thomas

In 'The Brook' and 'The Mill-Pond', Thomas shows how the awareness that comes with attempts to compose can divide the writer from the pre-linguistic experience he wishes to articulate. He also observes the emergence of poetry and the vernacular from pre-linguistic experience, and, once again, gives importance to habitation of the land. He writes in a review of an Australian collection of poems that:

A race hardly develops a genuine poetry more rapidly than an oak
achieves full maturity. Poetry is a natural growth, having more than a

¹⁰⁶ *Between the Acts*, p. 165, p. 166.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*; cited in Theodore Andrea Cook, *The Curves of Life* (London: Constable, 1914) p. 380.

¹⁰⁸ *The Heart of England* (London: Dent, 1909), p. 118.

superficial relation to roses and trees and hills. However airy and graceful it may be in foliage and flower, it has roots deep in a substantial past. It springs apparently from an occupation of the land, from long, busy, and quiet tracts of time, wherein a man or a nation may find its own soul. To have a future, it must have had a past.¹⁰⁹

The poet, Thomas continues, 'is akin to the old ballad singers. He cannot tear the heart out of the mystery of the new lands, but he leads us up to the mystery, and we experience it.' Just as the poet is described as an interpreter of the land, so Thomas also presents the land in terms of metaphors of language: 'If we but knew or cared, every swelling of the grass, every wavering line of hedge or path or road were an inscription, brief as an epitaph' (SC, 150). Features of landscape speak like a language but do not appear in words, forming, therefore, a language of the land.

Thomas's attempts to express in words this language of the land naturally lead him and his readers 'up to the mystery', as he puts it in his review of the Australian verse. His attempts lead to the borders of articulation, 'the making of landmarks and the beginning of historic places'.¹¹⁰ He constantly tries to reach the beginnings of the recorded history of mankind or, as in 'Insomnia', of the moment of inception of a poem. Having identified the source of the poem as lying in the environment, Thomas then works back to this initial point by focusing on the marks made on the land, and by writing with geographically and historically rooted metaphors of place: buildings, landmarks, place-names and indigenous flora and fauna.

Thomas's awareness of poetry lying within the environment also leads to his appreciation of names that are strongly connected to the land – place-names. These names, as discussed earlier, are particularly significant for Thomas. At times, long lists of them appear to take over from his voice in his books, as if replicating the role played by the sounds of the 'wood sorcery' and birds in 'Reading out of doors', or the wind and cows that interrupt the play in Woolf's *Between the Acts*. Thomas's use of these topographical lists comes most evidently to the fore in his critical biography, *Richard Jefferies, His Life and Work*.

The initial research for this book is an example of the relation between the act of writing and the physical environment in which it is initiated. The research involved travel, interviews and note-taking *in situ*. As Thomas notes, 'I was nearly always out of doors & when indoors I was writing out my notes or writing to crowds of people

¹⁰⁹ Review of *Rio Grande's Last Race, and Other Verses* by the Australian poet A.B. 'Banjo' Paterson, 'Advance, Australia!', *Daily Chronicle*, 8 February 1904, p. 3.

¹¹⁰ Thomas, 'England', in *The Last Sheaf*, pp. 91-111 (p. 100).

who were supposed to be likely to help me to know Jefferies.’¹¹¹ The emphasis on the physical, the open air and the land as forming an initial impetus for writing is carried through in this book to a focus on place, in the form of place-names, as a way of literally mapping out Jefferies’ imaginative territory. In the opening chapter of the book *Jefferies*, Thomas strings together the place-names in Jefferies’ childhood home, the area Jefferies returned to again and again in his later writings. Using these names as representations of the vernacular, Thomas traces the ancient roadways of this area, and so highlights the geographical and historical rootedness of this vernacular, and, indirectly, the importance of such rootedness to Jefferies. At the back of the first edition of this book, an ordnance survey map of the area provides a further indicator of the importance of the connection between the writing and its external physical surroundings, and gives perhaps the closest approximation possible in book form to names written on the land.¹¹² In the next chapter, Thomas attempts to repeat this technique with the personal names of the Jefferies’ family. However, the impact is not so strong. The names are too similar and they lack a physical base. Significantly, they are periodically interrupted by references to place-names, as if in an attempt to root them more securely in the land:

Jefferies is, and has long been, a common Wiltshire name, spelt also Jeffreis, Jeffreys, Jefferis, Jefferie, Jeffereye, Jeffery, Jefferyes, Jeffereyes, Jeafries, Jefferes. They were farmers, coopers, and the like at Wootton Bassett, Clevancy, Chippenham, Marlborough, in the seventeenth century. In the parishes of Chiseldon and Draycot Foliatt they rank with the Webbs, Garlicks, Crippses, Lookers, Nashes, Woolfords, Chowleses, Pontings, and Jeroms for abundance and persistency. Sprinkled over the corn-land and meadow between Draycot and Swindon there were several families of the name.¹¹³

However, for Thomas, names do not always mediate between writing and the environment. Places without names risk in their nameless state disappearing beyond the reach of history, but such places, as, for example, a line of trees, an overgrown combe and the overgrowth itself, are also celebrated by Thomas, and are often the focus of his writing. This is indicated in his account in *The South Country* of an imaginary record of the first annals of human history: ‘It will begin with a geological picture, something large, clear, architectural, not a mass of insignificant names’ (SC, 147).

¹¹¹ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 146 (22 September 1907).

¹¹² This map is only included in the first edition of *Jefferies*.

¹¹³ Thomas, *Richard Jefferies, His Life and Work* (London: Hutchinson, 1909), p. 23.

Thomas's focus on such nameless landmarks facilitates further exploration of the relation between human beings and the 'language' of landscape features. As noted earlier, Thomas believes that 'landscape and the air' in some sense are the prime movers in terms of creative acts, although he also records that 'the literature of Nature represents rather the unsocial and unspoken thought of men', suggesting the interdependency of this relationship.¹¹⁴ This interdependency can be seen in the case of manmade landmarks. Human beings may have formed these marks, but they are also dictated by the landscape: 'The peculiar combination of soil and woodland and water determines the direction and position and importance of the ancient trackways' (SC, 147). So, geographical locations rooted in particular temporal periods both speak for the writer, and hold marks that pre-date his existence. In other words, the role of creation has, at least in part, been taken from the writer, as indicated by the attribution of the active form of the verb 'wrought' to 'history' rather than to man in the following description of marks made on the land: 'In some places history has wrought like an earthquake, in others like an ant or mole; everywhere, permanently' (SC, 150). Landscape features are, therefore, not only effects of the combined activities of man and nature, but a record of them, acting as their language. As noted earlier, Thomas refers to this in his preface to *Norse Tales*, when 'scholars have tried to discover [the land of the Norse chroniclers] from the nature of the landscape and the conditions of life mentioned in the poems'.¹¹⁵

Thomas also refers to the way history is marked on the land. He writes in *The South Country* that the land 'is an old battlefield, and the earth shows the scars of its old wounds' (SC, 150). Woolf makes a strikingly similar reference to this in her novel *Between the Acts* where she observes how from an aeroplane 'you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars'.¹¹⁶ In her review of Thomas's *A Literary Pilgrim*, she also emphasises the deep impact that a landscape can have on a book, writing of the work of Thomas Hardy and Emily Brontë that

we can see great tracts of Wessex and of the Yorkshire Moors inhabited by a race of people who seem to have the rough large outline of the land itself. It is not with either of these writers a case of the word-painter's

¹¹⁴ Thomas, *The Country* (London: Batsford, 1913; repr. Cheltenham: Cyder Press, 1999), pp. 20-21.

¹¹⁵ *Norse Tales*, preface, p. 3.

¹¹⁶ *Between the Acts*, p. 8.

gift; for though they may have their detachable descriptions, the element we mean is rubbed deep into the texture and moulds every part.¹¹⁷

The phrase 'rough large outline' also reflects Thomas's 'something large, clear, architectural' in *The South Country*, written about eight years earlier.

In the context of this discussion of landscape features as a language, Thomas's comment on the importance of the 'little things' of history in his essay 'England' is particularly revealing. He writes that 'two little things in early English history suggest England more vividly to me than bigger things. One is the very stunted hawthorn round which the battle of Ashdown mainly clashed.' He continues:

Above all it tells me of the making of landmarks and the beginning of historic places. Of such things has England gradually been made, not lifted at one stroke by Heaven's command out of the azure main. The other little thing is the hoar apple tree where Harold's host met the Conqueror near Hastings.¹¹⁸

Thomas's use of the verb 'tells' in this passage evokes the story-telling activity of oral literature. It also stresses the need to listen, or pay attention, in order to find out the historical information recorded on the land, presenting the writer as discoverer rather than creator of a process, going 'back, through the paraphernalia of poetry into poetry again', qualities that Thomas singles out for praise in the work of Frost and Wordsworth.¹¹⁹ This is corroborated by Richard Mabey's observation in *Flora Britannica* that indigenous crab-apple trees, as well as the hawthorn, have long been 'conspicuous landscape features', and that, respectively, they comprise the third and first most frequently mentioned species as boundary features in Anglo-Saxon boundary charters.¹²⁰ So the 'little' hawthorn around which the battle clashes in Thomas's 'England' also symbolises the cause of that battle. It 'tells' the story of that battle.

Thomas's poem 'Roads' highlights further intricacies of the interdependent relationship between human beings and the language of the land by presenting human beings as the main readers of that language. Roads themselves are clear examples of features of the landscape that are manmade. The poem stresses the continuity of roads in contrast to their makers' fragile claim on continuing existence:

¹¹⁷ *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 October 1917, p. 489.

¹¹⁸ *The Last Sheaf*, p. 100, p. 101.

¹¹⁹ Review of Frost's *North of Boston*, 'Robert Frost', *New Weekly*, 2.21 (1914), 249 (8 August 1914).

¹²⁰ Richard Mabey, *Flora Britannica* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1996), p. 201, p. 212; see also Oliver Rackham, *The History of the Countryside* (London: Dent, 1986), p. 199, pp. 184-5.

Roads go on
While we forget, and are
Forgotten like a star
That shoots and is gone.

However, despite this assertion of their relative permanence, the poem also stresses the dependence of roads on men they outlive:

The hill road wet with rain
In the sun would not gleam
Like a winding stream
If we trod it not again. (*CP*, 263)

Just as language requires a speaker or a reader, so roads do not 'gleam' without the human traveller.

For further evidence of interdependency between reader and the thing read, it is worth turning at this point to my collection *The Drier The Brighter*. In this collection, the poems 'View from a caravan' and 'Light Leaves' both refer to the effect and action of the colour green in a natural scene.¹²¹ In 'Light Leaves', the opening poem of 'May Hill sequence', green light is described as

softening tree trunks, earth, grass, air,
lifting spirits.

In 'View from a caravan', 'the leaves' greens were what struck me'. In both poems, the colour green is depicted as active, taking a transitive verb and writing on the perceiver, striking her and lifting her spirits. In this way, the writer becomes the object written upon, equated with 'trunks, earth, grass, air'. However, in a move that demonstrates the often overlapping roles of writer and reader, the writer is also presented as a reader, interpreting the impression made by the colour green. This becomes clearer in a subsequent poem in the 'May Hill sequence', 'The Bulbs of May Hill'. Two lines of this poem read:

one touch of sun on the earth
and that spring they'll come up

This reference to wild bulbs is explained later in the poem with an expositional 'no flower is ever extinct', the writer therefore shifting in role from observer to interpreter or 'reader' of the bulbs.¹²²

However, Thomas's poems tend to resist the urge to interpret. In *The South Country*, he describes images of landscape features as inscriptions and epitaphs

¹²¹ *Brighter*, p. 242, p. 246.

¹²² 'May Hill sequence', *Brighter*, p. 246, p. 247 (Part III).

physically cut into the land, 'in many languages and characters. But most of us know only a few of these unspoken languages of the past, and only a few words in each' (SC, 150). In this passage, he stresses the interpretations that are held within the land. It interprets its own history, which is often also a human history. The task of a writer, therefore, is simply to transcribe that language into words.¹²³

Thomas's selection of an epitaph as an image of the language of landscape features is well chosen, since epitaphs are tangible forms of writing, carved into stone and consequently physically part of the objects on which they are written. This reflects Wordsworth's work on epitaphs. In his *Essays upon Epitaphs*, he stresses the physicality of epitaphs in his reference to them as the 'language of senseless stone', although for him, they also 'personate the deceased, and represent him as speaking from his own tomb-stone', and so give a distinctive image of the interrelation between language, land and human beings.¹²⁴ Wordsworth also emphasises the effect of the environment on the epitaph in his description of the weathered quality of his churchyard stone epitaphs, writing that 'the sun looks down upon the stone, and the rains of heaven beat against it', and that it is 'half-overgrown with Hemlock and Nettles'. This is even more apparent in the delicate descriptions Coleridge gives of his experience of taking notes of epitaphs, notes that Wordsworth drew on when writing *Essays upon Epitaphs*.¹²⁵ In the act of copying an epitaph, Coleridge is showered by the natural plants that have grown around and over the grave:

While I took the copy, the Groundsel showered its white Beard on me/
Groundsel & Fern on the grave, & the Thorns growing that had been
bound over it - On a square Tomb as high as half up my Thigh, where the
Tom Tits with their black velvet Caps showered down the lovely
jewberries on me.¹²⁶

Thus, epitaphs and the nature surrounding them make up a complex and rich conversation with the people who come across them.

In 'Roads', Thomas presents this conversation as continually in process. He makes use of images of a 'running' stream and a 'stretching' road, and of the dead as travellers coming back from France. The dead dance down the road, and,

¹²³ See *The South Country*, p. 115.

¹²⁴ William Wordsworth, 'Essays upon Epitaphs, I', in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by W. J. B. Owen and J. W. Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), II, 60.

¹²⁵ Wordsworth, *Prose Works*, II, 45-119.

¹²⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. by Kathleen Coburn, 5 vols (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), I, 1267. Wordsworth quotes this in his commentary on 'Essays upon Epitaphs, II', in *Prose Works*, II, 118.

accompanying the living as they travel along it, they speak in a 'pattering' language that also represents their physical movement along the road:

the dead
Returning lightly dance:

Whatever the road bring
To me or take from me,
They keep me company
With their pattering (*CP*, 267)

In the spirit of Wordsworth's and Coleridge's acts of collecting epitaphs and recording them, Thomas also claims a literary value for the vernacular of epitaphs in his early essay 'Epitaphs as a Form of English Literature', and in 1907 he includes three epitaphs transcribed from cemeteries among his collection of folksongs in *A Pocket Book of Songs*.¹²⁷ He also writes his own epitaphs of reclamation and remembrance. Prime examples are 'In Memoriam', which mourns those killed in the war; 'A Tale', which commemorates an old cottage; 'Tall Nettles', which remembers a neglected farmyard; and 'The Cherry Trees', which likens cherry blossom petals to confetti 'as for a wedding/ This early May morn' (*CP*, 313). The petals in 'The Cherry Trees' also act as memorials to the dead, their 'shedding' linked through rhyme with 'wedding' and with 'dead'. Such transformation of petals into epitaphs forms yet another reminder of the close relation between epitaphs and the natural environment, representing a language in which both human beings and the environment have their parts to play.

Conclusion

Thomas repeatedly refers to the flowing language of the land, fields, roads, houses, trees, fashioned and refashioned, 'like an earthquake' by history, 'everywhere, permanently' (*SC*, 150), 'fixed and free' (*CP*, 219), and fluid and continuous. These references suggest an emphasis on process even in the first moments of composing. As seen in Thomas's work and in *The Drier The Brighter* documentation, such initial moments of composing are strongly affected by their environment and literary context, and, to some extent, are produced by that environment. These initial moments

¹²⁷ Thomas, *Horae Solitariae* (London: Duckworth, 1902), 25-35, (p. 31); for further reference to Thomas's interest in epitaphs, see *Last Four Years*, pp. 125-6, Theresa Whistler, p. 288, Thomas to John Freeman, BL, MS RP 1791, Letters to John Freeman, folio 8 (20 August 1913); Bodleian, MS Eng lett c 281, R. Ingpen and J. W. Haines letters, folio 139b (p. 6).

can be seen, therefore, as part of a much longer process, forming a continuum that includes features carved in the land by geological forces, by the sounds of the natural environment, by manmade landscape features, and by the body of oral and printed literature.

Woolf and Thomas suggest that both the fixing effect of printed literature and the resultant emphasis on individual writers put the rich flexibility and fluidity of language at risk. In completed printed texts it is difficult to articulate what is pre-linguistic and to make provision for the continuation of the process of creativity in the finished work. The epitaph, which Thomas valued as a form of composition, provides one example of how a written form can encapsulate within itself that sense of continuing process. Stone-carved epitaphs situated in outdoor cemeteries preserve a close and changing relationship with the environment even after the initial moments of composition. As noted earlier, the environmental influences in the form of weathering affect such epitaphs long after the process of composition is apparently at an end and Thomas reflects this feature of epitaphs in a number of his poems, such as 'Tall Nettles' and 'In Memoriam [Easter 1915]', where he makes use of the epitaph-form to indicate and celebrate such unending influence.

In his poem 'Digging [2]', Thomas explores further the implications of such an emphasis on process. In this poem, excavation of the past is combined with burial of the present in the act of 'letting down two clay pipes into the earth', one belonging to Thomas and one, which his digging had presumably uncovered, to 'a soldier of Blenheim, Ramilies, and Malplaquet / Perhaps' (*CP*, 241). The owners of the clay pipes appear to be caught in their separate moments of time, divided from each other. The 'perhaps' with which Thomas ends his list of possible locations in the past for the second pipe reiterates this division. The division is so complete that he is unsure of the exact whereabouts of the owner of the other pipe. The situation of these two pipe-owners is similar to that of the would-be poet in 'Insomnia', unable to progress in his poem beyond 'the sere and the ember / Of the year and of me' to the more enduring 'empty thingless name' of birdsong in his poem 'The Word' (*CP*, 221).¹²⁸ This reference to a 'thingless name' harks back to a pre-linguistic era when, as described in 'Lob', 'our blackbirds sang no English' (*CP*, 163). However, the focus of 'Digging [2]' on the process of digging, of uncovering and covering up, also has the effect of

¹²⁸ *The Last Sheaf*, p. 42.

linking the two layers of history signalled by the two pipes. Despite the ages that divide them, these pipes are buried together, with the result that 'the dead man's immortality / Lies represented lightly with my own' (*CP*, 241). The poem implies, therefore, that an emphasis on process provides the means of eluding divisions caused by time, as much as it emphasises those divisions.

In Thomas's work, emphasis on process both in the act of composition and in the completed work is achieved by a number of techniques. These enable the printed poem to retain some of the qualities of oral literature and of language that is held within the land. The techniques can be grouped under the headings of 'Absence', 'Dislocation' and 'Divagations', and are not only common to the process of composing, but crucial to it. They form, therefore, the basis of the discussion of the composing process in the following chapters.

Appendix B

The first pencilled note to 'Spring Hijack'

One of those grey February mornings
(although it's March)
with the lamplights still turned on
and the countryside turned into car-park
snow clouds threatening
petrol cashpoints, roundabouts
and AA recommended inns ¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Kendall, Records, filed under 'Spring Hijack', probably 11 March 2004.

Appendix C

1 An extract from a letter from Edward Thomas to de la Mare, with an approximation of the spaced punctuation of the original

Page two

This address will most likely
find me till Saturday morning ,
tho it is not the time & place to
do nothing in , which is all I have
to do , except that in sleepless
hours this morning I found
myself (for the first time) trying

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hard to rhyme my mood &
failing very badly indeed , in
fact comically so , as I could
not complete the first verse or
get beyond the rhyme of ember &
September . This must explain
any future lenience towards the
mob of gentlemen that rhyme
with ease .¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Bodleian, MS Eng lett c 376, Letters to Walter de la Mare, folio 221. Author's spacing.

3 Extract from the end of 'Insomnia'

Outside, in the dark hush, to me lying prostrate, patient, unmoving, the song was absolutely monotonous, absolutely expressionless, a chain of little thin notes linked mechanically in a rhythm identical at each repetition. I remained awake, silently and as stilly as possible, cringing for sleep. I was an unwilling note on the instrument; yet I do not know that the robin was less unwilling. I strove to escape out of that harmony of bird, wind, and man. But as fast as I made my mind a faintly heaving, shapeless, grey blank, some form or colour appeared; memory or anticipation was at work.

Gradually I found myself trying to understand this dawn harmony. I vowed to remember it and ponder it in the light of day. To make sure of remembering I tried putting it into rhyme. I was resolved not to omit the date; and so much so that the first line had to be 'The seventh of September', nor could I escape from this necessity. Then September was to be rhymed with. The word 'ember' occurred and stayed; no other would respond to all my calling. The third and fourth lines, it seemed, were bound to be something like-

The sere and the ember
Of the year and of me.

This gave me no satisfaction, but I was under a very strong compulsion. I could do no more; not a line would add itself to the wretched three; nor did they cease to return again and again to my head. It was fortunate for me as a man, if not as an unborn poet, that I could not forget the lines; for by continual helpless repetition of them I rose yet once more to the weakness that sleep demanded. Gradually I became conscious of nothing but the moan of trees, the monotonous expressionless robin's song, the slightly aching body to which I was, by ties more and more slender, attached. I felt, I knew, I did not think that there would always be an unknown player, always wind and trees, always a robin singing, always a listener listening in the stark dawn: I knew also that if I were the listener I should not always lie thus in a safe warm bed thinking myself alive.... And so I fell asleep again on the seventh of September.¹³²

¹³² Thomas, 'Insomnia', in *The Last Sheaf*, pp. 41-3.

CHAPTER TWO Absence I: ellipses and aporia

The very best poems are left unwritten or sung in silence. It is my opinion that the real test for poets is how far they resist their impulse to utterance.¹

Yone Noguchi

In the dedicatory preface to *The Icknield Way* Thomas describes this ancient road as ‘a symbol of mortal things with their beginnings and ends always in immortal darkness’. This description can be read as an image of the beginning and end of the composing process, which Thomas believes lies beyond his perception. This is why he not only places an emphasis on process in the content of *The Icknield Way* but in its method of composition, and more generally in his own methods of composing. He writes: ‘Today I know there is nothing beyond the farthest of far ridges except a signpost to unknown places. The end is in the means.’² The ‘end’ can only be indicated by its absence.

Thomas’s praise for the contemporary poet he admires most, Robert Frost, is also couched in terms of absence. Frost’s poetry, he writes, is to be valued because ‘extraordinary things have not been sought for’. He praises Frost’s poems for what they ‘lack’, ‘appear to lack’ or are ‘free from’.³ Similarly, D. H. Lawrence in his *Love Poems and Others* is partly ‘remarkable for what he does not do’.⁴ In addition, the limited success Thomas allowed the Imagist poets is attributed to the suggestion the poems hold of an absent model, which in the case of Pound’s imagist poems is described by Thomas as ‘the restraint imposed by Chinese originals or models’. When Thomas denigrates the Imagist poems, however, it is for their conspicuous lack of absence. He deplores the way they stick ‘out of the crowd like a tall marble monument’, adding that ‘whether it is real marble is unimportant except to posterity; the point is that it is conspicuous.’⁵

Thomas’s appreciation of absence, particularly when applied to Imagism, inevitably evokes comparisons with the aesthetics of Japanese literature, which had a strong influence on Western poetry in Thomas’s time. Since Japanese aesthetics are

¹ *English Writings*, II, 58.

² *The Icknield Way*, dedication, p. vii, p. vi.

³ Reviews of *North of Boston*, ‘Robert Frost’, *New Weekly*, 2.21 (8 August 1914), 249, and ‘A Book of the Day: A New Poet’, *Daily News*, 22 July 1914, p. 7.

⁴ Review of D. H. Lawrence, *Love Poems and Others* in ‘More Georgian Poetry’, *Bookman*, 44 (April 1913), 47.

⁵ Review of *Des Imagistes*, ‘Exotic Verse’, *New Weekly*, 1.8 (9 May 1914), 249.

closely related to a number of points discussed in this and following chapters, it is worth detailing the extent of Thomas's exposure to them. Japanese aesthetics were vastly influential not only on Pound and the Imagist poets, but on many other poets and writers in the West in the early twentieth century. Thomas himself reviewed a number of translations and paraphrases of Japanese writings, and also wrote a book on Lafcadio Hearn, a main figure in the interpretation of Japanese culture for the West and Western literature for Japan, as part of Constable's 'Modern Biographies' series.⁶ Inclusion of Hearn in this popular series is another indication of the general interest in Japan of that time. Thomas was fully aware of Hearn's deep understanding of Japan, concluding at the end of his critical biography that 'I sometimes feel that with Japanese writers he should be compared'.⁷ In *Hearn*, he also quotes Basil Hall Chamberlain's remarks in *Things Japanese* on Hearn's importance: 'Hearn understands contemporary Japan better, and makes *us* understand it better, than any other writer.'⁸ Hearn was an important figure in Japan also. He has been described by his publishers as 'the great interpreter of things Japanese to the West', and as a man considered to be 'almost as Japanese as haiku'.⁹ The other main figure in the interpretation of Japanese culture for the West is the Japanese writer Yone Noguchi, whom Thomas reviewed at least three times.¹⁰ Noguchi was well known in the West, and exchanged letters discussing writing with many contemporaries of Thomas. Pound, for example, wrote to Noguchi in 1911 that 'you are giving us the spirit of Japan is it not?' and compared Noguchi's work to his own efforts to reclaim Romance literature, while Thomas's close friend, Bottomley, in a dedicatory poem to Noguchi, compares Noguchi's 'far land rare and desirable' to 'this greyer place of shadow and

⁶ See *Fairy Tales from Far Japan* review in *Morning Post*, 21 September 1908; *The Mastersingers of Japan* review, *Daily Chronicle*, 4 June 1910, cited in Emery, *Checklist*, p. 55; *Warriors of Old Japan* review, 'Tell Me A Story! Two volumes about America and Japan', *Daily Chronicle*, 31 August 1911, p. 6; also, reviews of Yone Noguchi in 'A Poet and Others', *Daily Chronicle*, 31 May 1910, p. 8, and 'Singers of the Time', *Daily Chronicle*, 23 August 1910, p. 6; Edward Thomas, *Lafcadio Hearn* (London: Constable, 1912), p. 90.

⁷ *Lafcadio Hearn*, p. 90.

⁸ *Things Japanese: being notes on various subjects connected with Japan for the use of travellers and others*, 4th ed. (London: John Murray, 1902), p. 65, cited in Thomas, *Hearn*, p. 80.

⁹ Lafcadio Hearn, *Kokoru: hints and echoes of Japanese inner life* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1896), publisher's foreword, p. vii. Further detail is available from Yoshinobu Hakutani, who writes that Hearn was 'best known for interpreting Western literature for the Japanese audience and, in turn, introducing the exotic [*sic*] culture and tradition to the West', Noguchi, *English Writings*, preface, II, 19, 9.

¹⁰ Thomas also cites Yone Noguchi's *Lafcadio Hearn in Japan* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1910) as being, along with Chamberlain's *Things Japanese*, one of the sources for his book on Lafcadio Hearn, *Hearn*, p. 7.

veil'.¹¹ Noguchi was also highly regarded in Japan. Yoshinobu Hakutani records that Noguchi was 'perhaps the most influential professor of English in Japanese history', as well as 'the only native [Japanese] scholar writing in English' at that time; and, as the first Japanese poet to write directly in English, he also 'assumed a crucial role as an interpreter of Japanese culture for the West'.¹²

Japanese aesthetics place a strong emphasis on absence, referred to by Noguchi as 'the art of suggestion'. This aesthetic is expressed by the fourteenth-century Buddhist priest, Kenkō, who is among the most highly respected writers on aesthetics in Japan, when he admires not blossom in full bloom but 'twigs which bear no blossoms as yet and a garden strewn with withered petals'.¹³ Even W. G. Aston, in his unsympathetic assessment of Japanese literature, *A history of Japanese literature*, published in 1899, refers to Japanese poetry as being 'chiefly remarkable for its limitations – for what it is not, rather than what it has'.¹⁴

For Thomas, this focus on absence in Japanese literature resonates with his own awareness of the importance of absence in creative writing and the dilemma this poses for a writer, who, in articulating absence, is, therefore, attempting to articulate that which eludes linguistic formulation. Thomas's response to this dilemma is to place emphasis on the use of absence in the process of composing process, as well as in completed works. The ways in which Thomas, and other poets, use absence in the process of composing are often interrelated, but can be grouped loosely under the headings of ellipses, aporia, gaps and unfinishedness. Absence will be examined, therefore, in this chapter and the next, under these four headings.

¹¹ Pound to Noguchi, Noguchi, *English Letters*, p. 211 (2 September 1911); lines from a dedicatory poem to Bottomley's play *Midsummer Eve* entitled 'To Yone Noguchi, with a copy of *Midsummer's Eve*', dated 1906, Gordon Bottomley, *Poems and Plays* (London: Bodley Head, 1953), p. 73.

¹² Yoshinobu Hakutani, in Noguchi, *English Writings*, preface, II, 19, 9; see also Noguchi, *Yone Noguchi: Collected English Letters*, ed. by Ikuko Atsumi (Tokyo: Yone Noguchi Society, 1975), preface, p. 3.

¹³ Kenkō, *The Miscellany of a Japanese Priest*, trans. by William N. Porter (London: Humphrey Milford, 1914; repr. Tokyo: Tuttle, 1983), p. 105 (Section 137). Also known as *Tsurezuregusa* or *Essays in Idleness*.

¹⁴ W. G. Aston, *A history of Japanese literature* (London: Heinemann, 1899), p. 24.

Ellipses

Vervain ... basil ... orison –
Whisper their syllablings till all meaning is gone,
And sound all vestige loses of mere word¹⁵
Walter de la Mare

Thomas makes great use of ellipses both in his drafting processes and in completed poems. His employment of them is very specific. They act as indicators of omission rather than the omission itself, pointing to the inaccessibility, albeit temporary, of the omitted part of the work. They tend not to cut a text short, but, in accordance with Judith Butcher's definition, represent 'a pause, rather than an interruption', forming bridges between known areas of text.¹⁶ As a corollary of this, they invite the reader, and sometimes also the writer, to supply, or imagine, the missing part. The importance of ellipses for Thomas cannot be overstated. He makes it very clear that their presence, whether typographical or metaphorical, in translations and original work is for him a measure of that work's effectiveness.

...in drafts

Finding themselves in a plot, they might suppose it appropriate
to behave as though it were that sort of plot.¹⁷
A. S. Byatt

Examination of the role ellipses play in the development of a draft identified by R. G. Thomas as the possible origin of three of Thomas's finished poems, 'April', 'The Glory' and 'July', shows how the absence that ellipses indicate can become a driving force in the composing process. The draft, which will be referred to as the 'April / July / Glory' draft, begins:

As we met – the nightingale sang
As we loved _____
As we parted _____ the same. (CP, 396)

The two unbroken lines act as ellipses, signalling the omission of a word or words. In this draft, as in many other instances in Thomas's work, although the exact identity of

¹⁵ 'Incantation', in *The Collected Poems of Walter de la Mare* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 256. From *Memory and Other Poems* (1938). Author's emphasis.

¹⁶ Butcher, *Copy-editing: The Cambridge Handbook*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 153; see also John Ellison Kahn, *The Right Word at the Right Time* (London: Reader's Digest Association, 1985), pp. 207-8.

¹⁷ A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance* (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 422.

the omitted words are unknown to the poet, an analysis of the development of his drafts makes it clear that the pattern they form is known. That pattern gives him sufficient information to enable him to deduce certain characteristics of the missing text, such as sound, quantity and rhythm.

The final section of the 'April / July / Glory' draft reads:

How swift time passes when nothing is

In Time _____ still hour after hour

Filled to content with what ring doves say.

I thought the above worth thinking of saying [This line is deleted]
(CP, 396)

Although the last line of the above quotation, 'I thought the above worth thinking of saying', is deleted, it is still, unusually for Thomas, legible in the manuscript. This line reappears, slightly changed, in the final version of 'July'. It is clearly, therefore, a crucial part of this draft, signalling a very specific gap, so specific that the actual words are still discernible, even though they are presented as a deletion. This gap is filled in when Thomas redrafts the poem. It can be said, therefore, that it forms an example of a metaphorical ellipsis. This section of the text acts elliptically, standing in for words not yet arrived at.

When redrafting, Thomas splits up these final lines. Some form the final lines of his poem 'The Glory' and some form the final lines of his 'July'. An example of the detail of this drafting process makes very clear the role that ellipses, and the absence that they indicate, can have in driving the development of a poem. In the completed version of 'The Glory', the positioning and stressing of 'How' and 'swift' at the start of a line that also begins a sentence, and the positioning of the capitalised 'Time' as the first stressed word of a line, repeat the pattern set up in the first draft. In the 'April / July / Glory' draft, the lines read:

How swift time passes when nothing is

In Time _____ still hour after hour (CP, 396)

In 'The Glory', they become:

How dreary-swift, with naught to travel to,

Is Time? I cannot bite the day to the core. (CP, 199)

The changes made in these lines suggest that the redrafting process largely consists of filling in missing words, not unlike the activity involved in finishing a partially

completed jigsaw puzzle. The parts already selected in the puzzle, or poem, form crucial aids in the search for what is still missing. They provide, together with the positioning and length of the spaces they encircle, information on characteristics of the missing bits.

In the drafting of 'July', although Thomas makes detailed changes to the lines of the first draft, their general position, rhythm and length are retained, indicating the prime importance of these elements in the drafting process. The lines in the 'April / July / Glory' draft read:

Filled to content with what ring doves say,
I thought the above worth thinking of saying [This line is deleted],
(CP, 396)

They become the final lines of 'July':

Nothing there was worth thinking of so long;
All that the ring-doves say, far leaves among,
Brims my mind with content thus still to lie. (CP, 201)

As noted earlier, in the 'April / July / Glory' draft, the phrase referring to ring doves, 'with what ring doves say', is followed by a deleted line. The presence of this deleted line on the page, still legible under the line that crosses it out, is a subtle record of a previous draft. In this previous draft, 'with what ring doves say' took a penultimate position. The line reappears in that penultimate position in the final poem, but slightly reformulated as 'all that the ring-doves say'. As well as changing two of the words from 'with what' to 'all that', the phrase has acquired an extra unstressed syllable in the additional definite article. It has also acquired a hyphen, and has changed its position from the second half to the first half of the line. However, as with the redrafted line in 'The Glory', its length remains unchanged.

So, 'I thought the above worth thinking of saying', the deleted line of the 'April / July / Glory' draft, is reinstated, little changed, as the third last line in the final 'July'. 'I thought the above worth thinking of saying' becomes 'Nothing there was worth thinking of so long'. The phrase 'worth thinking of' is retained and the juxtaposition with the ring dove line is continued. However, 'worth thinking of' now precedes the ring dove line and is separated from it by a semi-colon instead of a deletion and indentation. As a result, the distance between the two lines remains constant, while the connection between them is strengthened by the similar sounds of their endings: 'long' and 'among'. Thus, the sound and position of the deleted line in

the draft are largely retained when it reappears in 'July'. What changes is the sense, which is reversed, shifting from the affirmative in the draft to the negative 'Nothing there was worth thinking of so long' in 'July', and picking up the word 'nothing' from 'How swift time passes when nothing is' (*CP*, 396), an earlier line in the first draft. The way these words are redrafted clearly shows the priority when redrafting that the positioning and sound of a line can have over sense.

The above analysis shows how, as the poem develops, the information held in the words and ellipses of a first incomplete draft appears to dictate the poet's drafting decisions. In other words, these decisions are made in response to patterns - and often, words - already held within the burgeoning poem. As Thomas expresses this, when he writes of his poems to Frost, 'the rhymes have dictated themselves decidedly'.¹⁸ In 'Rhyme and Determination in Hopkins and Thomas', Peter McDonald refers to this influence of form in one draft on succeeding drafts as 'the art of submission'. He writes that

the requirements of poetic form have to do centrally with choice, with the exercise of an authorial free will in composition; but this is at every stage a choice compromised by the words available, and the relations with other words which they contain or uncover.

This situation, McDonald continues, necessitates what he terms a 'mastery in the art of submission'.¹⁹ The compromise between what McDonald calls 'authorial free will' and 'submission' finds a parallel in Thomas's references to the 'landscape and the air' in 'Reading out of doors'. On the one hand, they 'think' Thomas's thoughts for him, but, on the other hand, he refers to 'the literature of Nature' as also mirroring 'the unsocial and unspoken thought of men'.²⁰

A more detailed example of a writer's processes when practising this 'art of submission' can be found in the documentation of *The Drier The Brighter*. In the poem 'Building', my memories of the decisions taken during this process reveal more of this delicate balance between choice and submission.²¹ Here, as with the 'April / July / Glory' draft, parts of the text act as ellipses, indicating the space to be taken up

¹⁸ *Elected Friends: R.F. & E.T.*, p. 39 (15 December 1914).

¹⁹ 'Rhyme and Determination in Hopkins and Edward Thomas', *Essays in Criticism*, 43 (1993) 228-245 (pp. 243-4).

²⁰ 'Reading out of doors', *Atlantic Monthly*, 92 (1903), 275-277 (p. 276); Thomas, *The Country* (London: Batsford, 1913; repr. Cheltenham: Cyder Press, 1999), pp. 20-21.

²¹ For the final version of this poem, see *Brighter*, p. 258. For more detail of the drafting process, see Appendix D.

by words not yet arrived at. Once these words are discovered, the text that is acting as ellipses is simply dropped.

The last stanza of an early draft of 'Building' reads:

That is why 'Pedrera' broke the grid of the streets and why
the cathedral is still building a hundred years after
the tram has run him over to meet
finality in a public ward.²²

This passage makes use of the *kakekotoba*, or pivot-word, a major literary device in Japanese which works in some ways like an English pun, though less conclusively and not necessarily humorously, to connect separate sets of images. Chamberlain refers to the *kakekotoba* in *Things Japanese*, one of the books Thomas, whose own syntax often sports a *kakekotoba*-like ambiguity, quotes from in his *Hearn*. Chamberlain describes *kakekotoba* as follows: 'a curious species of pun, named "pivot," in which the first part of the sentence has no logical end, the second part no logical beginning.'²³ In *The Drier The Brighter* poem, 'Building', the words 'and why' and 'after' act like pivot-words. They are used at the end of the first two lines of the last stanza, and also, as enjambments, lead into the next lines. The expectation this double use of pivot-words sets up is that the next line will also end in an ambiguous pivot between enjambment and conclusion. However, the phrase 'over to meet/ finality' does not fulfil these expectations. Despite my awareness of this, I choose to keep the phrase in the draft as an ellipsis in preference to a dash or a blank space, because it does meet the requirements of sense. At this point, I already know that I want to end the stanza with a reference to Gaudi's fatal street accident and anonymous death in hospital. I am dissatisfied with the phrase because it does not fit the rhythmic or grammatical pattern, since 'meet' cannot be read intransitively and 'finality' is too long. However, I retain it temporarily because it does at least carry the sense I wish to convey. This contrasts with the case of the 'April / July / Glory' draft, where the impression is that Thomas discovers the sense of the poem as he writes, as indicated by his re-instatement of a deleted line. In 'Building', however, sense appears to some degree to drive the drafting process.

So, to continue the pattern established in the 'Building' draft by the pivot-words 'and why' and 'after' in a satisfactory way, it is necessary to find a verb that does not offer too unambiguous an enjambment into the next line. The reader needs to

²² Kendall, Records, filed under 'gaudi', 22 October 2003.

²³ *Things Japanese*, p. 373.

be prevented from initially interpreting 'run him over' as a reference to a traffic accident. This phrase should instead be read first as a reference to an act of transportation from one place to another. Only once the next line is reached, should it be revised to read as a reference to an accident. In other words, at this point I am searching for a verb that can be read both transitively and intransitively or, alternatively, a verb that can also act as a noun. My awareness of these grammatical requirements is clearly recorded in a subsequent draft, where I note in brackets after the line referring to the tram that 'a verb-noun or an intr verb' is required.²⁴

The word, or words, that can fulfil these requirements eludes me for some time, but I am nevertheless confident that a fitting alternative to 'meet' existed, as I record shortly afterwards:

I was stuck with what verb to put there I knew vaguely the word play I wanted but how to get it. I also knew reading it through again and again it would just somehow come. It did.

The vague 'somehow' in this quotation is in part explained by the reference to reading 'again and again'. This repeated reading enables me to gather specific information from the pattern that has already formed within the draft. My confidence at this point is also partly due to my belief that 'over' can be read in numerous ways. As a result, I restrict my search to words that can follow on from 'over'. My supposition turns out to be correct, since, in this way, I arrive at 'strike out', a verb that can act both transitively and intransitively, and can also evoke both destruction and positive action. So, the lines become:

a tram ran me over to strike out
as nobody in a public ward.²⁵

Although I was unaware of it at the time, my conviction that multiple readings of 'over' would supply the ending to the line is supported by the work of the linguist, Claudia Brugman. She has recorded nearly one hundred kinds of use of 'over' in several grammatical categories.²⁶ In addition, as the cognitive linguist, George Lakoff, argues, Brugman's survey, along with a number of other studies of verbal particles, prefixes and prepositions, demonstrates that there is 'far less arbitrariness in the lexicon than has previously been thought', since, although 'over' is polysemous, the

²⁴ Records, filed under 'gaudi', 25 October 2003.

²⁵ Records, filed under 'gaudi', 27 October 2003; 6 December 2003.

²⁶ Cited in George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) pp. 418-9.

different meanings it carries are linked associatively or logically.²⁷ This makes it likely that persistent associative thinking will discover the nearest solution, the very course I take when searching for 'strike out'. So, although unaware of Lakoff and Brugman's work at the time, the notes I make on my drafting process reflect their findings. The close persistent and associative focus on grammar, therefore, which in this case includes a survey of the different uses of 'over', provides a solution. Such persistent associative thinking can also apply to the study of the process of composing. A similar close persistent and associative focus on a poet's notes on the decision-making process during the drafting of a poem can reveal aspects of that process, as was the case in this current analysis of the drafting of 'Building'.

My focus on grammar in the 'Building' draft is also replicated by Philip Gross in his response to my introduction of 'strike out'. This response reiterates the importance of grammatical pattern in the making and reading of a poem. Gross writes:

Tricky double meaning on 'strike out'. Maybe my reluctance to settle down to reading it both ways as rich ambiguity is the uncertainty of the grammar: from one angle the tram seems to be the thing that strikes out. There's a kakekotoba feel about that shiftiness...²⁸

My reaction to this feedback also focuses on grammar as I adjust the line to read more smoothly, once again indicating the importance of pattern:

a tram ran me over to strike out
no body in a hospital ward.²⁹

When working on the 'Building' drafts, my recognition that I have failed to find effective pivot-words to complete the overall patterns of rhythm, register, grammar, levels of meaning or style comes about as a result of my understanding of the underlying pattern of the poem. The pattern not only pre-exists the final poem, but also pre-exists drafts of that poem. My decisions as to whether to accept or reject possible redraftings of parts of the poem are dependent on the extent to which those redraftings fit the perceived pattern already existing in the poem.

Philip Gross's part in the above drafting process indicates the valuable role reader-response can play in this 'art of submission'. In this context, Wolfgang Iser's discussion in *The Act of Reading* of readers' responses to texts that have completed the drafting process is illuminating. Iser suggests that the success of a completed poem

²⁷ Lakoff, p. 460.

²⁸ Gross, Email Responses, 12 December 2003.

²⁹ *Brighter*, p. 258

can be measured by anticipation of a reader's response to it. Iser refers to this possible, rather than actual, reader as the 'implied reader'. He writes:

Texts must already contain certain conditions of actualisation that will allow their meaning to be assembled in the responsive mind of the recipient. The concept of the implied reader is therefore a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient without necessarily defining him: this concept prestructures the role to be assumed by each recipient, and this holds true even when texts appear to ignore their possible recipient or actively exclude him. Thus the concept of the implied reader designates a network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text.³⁰

Although Iser is referring to completed works, his words are equally applicable to poetic drafts. The anticipation of future responses from readers affects the development of the draft. In addition, the drafting process of 'Building' shows how the role taken by Iser's 'implied reader' can be replicated by an actual reader. Actual readers' responses produced by the 'network of response-inviting structures' present in the draft can help the writer identify passages that are not integral parts of the work but that are instead acting as ellipses for words not yet arrived at. This then enables the writer to fill in such ellipses where desired. During the drafting process, the writer, too, can act as an external reader of her own work-in-progress, re-reading the draft after some time has passed. In this way, the pattern of the final poem, which readers' responses can help identify, is unfolded during the drafting process. Completion of the drafting process occurs when all the elements in the poem fit that pattern and alert readers of it produce the appropriate response.

... *in completed work*

The longing to make the glimpsed good place permanent.³¹

R. S. Thomas

The importance of ellipses in the drafting process is indicated by the extent to which they are retained in completed works, forming part of their final pattern and giving the impression of work still potentially in process. In drafts, ellipses are often used with the intention of replacing them with text. This can also be the case in completed interactive works, such as digital poetry, although, conventionally, in completed work such opportunities for replacement no longer exist. In these cases, ellipses play a

³⁰ *The Act of Reading: A theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 34.

³¹ *Selected Poems of Edward Thomas*, ed. by R. S. Thomas, 11th edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1964; repr. 1998), introduction, p. ix.

different role. An examination of this role will, however, also help illuminate the use of ellipses in the drafting process.

In Thomas's work, typographical ellipses are used conventionally as markers of incomplete quotations. They also indicate a lack of connected thought. This occurs, for example, in his prose piece 'Home' in the passage expressing the dying thoughts of a soldier, 'the inn dogs lying in the sun ... the sun... the mist ... his country ... not the country he had fought for ... the country he was going to'.³² Another use Thomas makes of ellipses in completed work is as representations of the silences of taboo, as in the following reference to possible death in battle: 'If I should lose my head, why, so, / I should want nothing more....' (CP, 325)

However, as is also the case in drafts, ellipses can be expressed by the use of words, particularly when these are foreign words unknown to most readers and so sharing the impenetrability of typographical ellipses. The documentation accompanying the drafts of *The Drier The Brighter* poem 'absence of birdsong' reveals some of the reasons for using foreign words as ellipses. This poem includes the Japanese word '*seppuku*'. Since most readers are unfamiliar with this word, it obliges them to pause and acknowledge a level of meaning inaccessible to them. This pause in the reading of the poem is reflected within the poem in the space surrounding the word *seppuku*:

back curves to ache, creasing stomach
slight stiffness on left side of neck
head empties

seppuku

ah, quietness!³³

Such a use of ellipses, both initiating and marking a pause in the flow of the text, reflects and intensifies the omission they indicate.

The decision to use the word *seppuku* came about as a result of a response from Philip Gross, when he queried the meaning of 'death poem' in an early draft of 'absence of birdsong'.³⁴ This provides a good example of the way in which a reader's response can inform and alter the drafting process, since Gross's query highlighted for me the need to consider the extent of English readers' knowledge of Japanese culture

³² 'Home', *Light*, pp. 24-45 (p. 45).

³³ *Brighter*, p. 256.

³⁴ Email Responses, 22 February 2004. See Appendix E.1.

and language. As a result, *seppuku*, meaning 'ritual suicide', was inserted in the text. It acts, deliberately, as an ellipsis for the topic of ritual suicide. When identified, it transforms the poem, for those more conversant with Japanese culture, into a 'death poem' or *jisei*. The *jisei*, usually in the form of a tanka or a haiku, is traditionally composed by victims just before they commit ritual suicide.³⁵

In an extreme case, the whole of the completed written text can form an ellipsis, as in Thomas's 'But these things also'. This begins as if continuing a previous list of traditional emblems of spring. The poem adds to that unwritten list a series of items found on the marginal 'banks by the roadside'. It names a little bleached snail shell, 'chip of flint, and mite/ of chalk, and the small birds' dung'. These are all examples of mistaken identity, as the following lines of 'But these things also' indicate:

All the white things a man mistakes
For earliest violets. (*CP*, 127)

The poem re-enacts the experience of mistaking 'white things' for traditional emblems of spring by reversing the usual positions of conventional and overlooked signs of spring in the poem. The overlooked items are placed in the centre of the poem and conventional emblems are pushed to the margins. They are visible in the poem only in the illusory 'earliest violets', the background 'chattering' of 'starling flocks', and otherwise are relegated to the unwritten list of more obvious emblems. The existence of this unwritten list is indicated by the 'But' with which the poem's first line and its title begin. By presenting this slight poem as an ellipsis, encased within a longer list of spring emblems, Thomas is able to give focused attention to the peripheral. This poem, as an ellipsis, is not only a sign of omission but also the omitted thing itself, containing the omitted things as part of its content.

As early reactions to Thomas's verse indicate, this view of the text as itself an ellipsis may have been difficult for conventional readers of his time to assimilate. Such difficulties occur when the pattern of expectations held within the poem differs from those brought to it by its readers. Thomas records one such reaction to his poetry in a letter to Farjeon. He is referring to the rejection of his poems by the publisher Blackwood: 'Blackwood just thought it looked very much like prose and was puzzled by the fact it was got up like verse.'³⁶ Five years later, de la Mare refers to this gulf between the reader and Thomas's poems in the foreword to the 1920 edition of

³⁵ A tanka is a traditional Japanese syllabic poem consisting of thirty-one syllables.

³⁶ *Last Four Years*, p. 124 (12 March 1915).

Thomas's *Collected Poems*, writing that 'loose-woven, monotonous, unrelieved, the verse, as verse, may appear to a careless reader accustomed to the customary'.³⁷ In other words, de la Mare is warning readers that their expectations are likely to be at odds with the patterns held within the poems, and so advising them to pay close attention to the 'network of response-inviting structures' that exist in the poems. This will enable them, as Thomas puts it, 'to consider and see their "unfinish"'.³⁸

Like 'But these things also', my poem, 'One Minute's', also forms an ellipsis, not of marginal evidence of spring, but of evidence of emotion.³⁹ As Gross observes, even the title 'One Minute's' includes an elliptical omission 'with a silence instead of the word "silence"'. The poem records minutiae of the exterior world, such as tea, the time, a location and a view, while interior emotional turmoil resides only vestigially in the lines. There is a strong sense of something, the poem perhaps, lying beyond the words. This is expressed by Siobhan Wall, who writes: 'In One Minutes [*sic*], I wanted more, although I imagined this might have been meant to be read in just a minute.'⁴⁰

The avoidance of emotion in the poem, indicated only by ellipses, and the resultant paradoxical emphasis upon that emotion, is also a driving force in its drafting process. Comparison of drafts of this poem reveals a gradual intensification of ellipses that is related to a focus upon the poem's emotional effect. In an early draft, the vestigial elliptical reference to emotion results in a confusion to which Gross reacts: 'The very ending ["undisturbed/by tears"] alludes to emotion, somewhere, and I'm not sure where to place it.'⁴¹ My response is not to increase the expository element but to render the poem more elliptical. In the next draft of 'One Minute's', the mention of 'tears' is removed and their presence is only hinted at in the roots of the final words:

unblurred
undisturbed.⁴²

Gross's subsequent reaction shows that such intensification of the elliptical has brought a resolution to the initial confusion. He writes that 'I approve of the changes' and adds 'I think "unblurred / undisturbed" is a fine innovation'.⁴³

³⁷ *Collected Poems* (1920), foreword, p. x.

³⁸ *Edward Thomas's Letters to Jesse Berridge*, ed. by Anthony Berridge (London: Enitharmon, 1983), p. 78 (1 June 1915), hereafter referred to as *Jesse Berridge*.

³⁹ For final version of 'One Minute's', see *Brighter*, p. 233.

⁴⁰ Gross, Email Responses, 14 December 2002; also, Wall, 22 May 2005.

⁴¹ Email Responses, of initial draft of 'One Minute's', 11 November 2002. See Appendix F.

⁴² Records, filed under '11^11', 18 December 2002.

The final version takes this further. Making rhetorical use of ellipses, only one negative prefix, ‘un-’, is applied to two simple past participles, ‘blurred/disturbed’. A line break divides the prefix from the participles. The result is the retention of both the negative and the positive reading of these participles. ‘Un-/blurred’ can be read as ‘unblurred’ and as ‘blurred’. ‘Disturbed’ can also be read as ‘undisturbed’:

un-
blurred/disturbed ⁴⁴

Emotional turmoil is otherwise present in ‘One Minute’s’ only in the shifts in perspective that occur between the speaker’s exterior location in the café and the café’s exterior location in the grounds of the Imperial War Museum and also in the different manipulations of the font of the text, which has been italicised, indented and scattered across generous amounts of print-free white space. Additional emphasis on the elliptical is discernible in my choice of a light, almost illegible, grey as the colour of the font in which the poem is printed:

window view:

birch
leaves
lawn

un-
blurred / disturbed

45

The process of composing this poem is one of gradual elimination of the obvious and increase of the elliptical. This is developed through the drafts by elliptical manoeuvres of perspective, font change, space and colour that continue until the point is reached when the subject of the poem consists mainly of what is missing from it. There is a resonance here with the Japanese emphasis on absence in poetry and on what is not said, which Barbara Dordi picks up on when she observes of this poem: ‘First glance [*sic*] it seems like a Japanese garden, full of light – glimpses of things – time’.⁴⁶ A Japanese influence is also present in the discretion of the references in ‘One Minute’s’ to the subject of death and loss, a discretion common to Japanese soldiers writing death poems. The discretion in ‘One Minute’s’ is so extensive that, although the poem is set definitively in the Imperial War Museum at eleven o’clock on

⁴³ Email Responses, 18 December 2002.

⁴⁴ *Brighter*, p. 233.

⁴⁵ *Brighter*, p. 233.

⁴⁶ Email Responses, 5 January 2005.

Remembrance Day, it hardly allows the possibility of 'tears' to exist. A Japanese-like discretion is also present in Thomas's poems. This is indicated by the fact that, despite being written in war-time when he was making successive decisions to enlist and then volunteer for active service at the Front, these poems deal so indirectly with the subject of war that many of his mid-twentieth-century critics missed the references to it, even though certain of his poems were included in war poem anthologies as early as the 1920s.⁴⁷ John H. Johnston, for example, wrote in 1964 that Thomas 'refused to let the conflict interfere with [his] nostalgic rural visions'.⁴⁸

... *as a measure*

that slight something absent⁴⁹

Edward Thomas

As a critic, Thomas uses ellipses to measure the success of translated work. He writes approvingly of Noguchi's English poems that they had 'seldom a quite definite significance. They suggest richly but mistily.'⁵⁰ This observation in part reflects the emphasis in Japanese aesthetics on ellipses in poetry, referred to by Noguchi as the ability 'to read the space between the lines'.⁵¹ However, Thomas also applies this judgement to Ezra Pound's 1910 survey of Romance literature, *The Spirit of Romance*. He praises the 'admirable' translations in this book for their ability to suggest 'the superiority of the original'.⁵² Pound gives a similar evaluation of his own work, writing to Noguchi that in *The Spirit of Romance* he was 'trying to deliver from obscurity certain forgotten odours of Provence and Tuscany'.⁵³ It is clear, therefore, that Thomas's high estimation of elliptical qualities in translations is linked to his view that they are to some extent anonymous pieces of work, belonging neither to the original writer nor to the translator. This is also made evident in his comment on

⁴⁷ Jacqueline Trotter, ed., *Valour & Vision: Poems of the War 1914-1918* (London: Longmans, Green, 1920), pp. 102-3 ('Lights Out', followed by a poem by Thomas's brother, Julian, 'In Memoriam: Edward Thomas'). See also Trotter, *Valour & Vision*, enl. edn, rev. by Martin Hopkinson, 1923, p.126, pp.127-8 ('The Trumpet' and 'Lights Out').

⁴⁸ Cited in Motion, p. 90.

⁴⁹ Hearn, p. 78.

⁵⁰ *Daily Chronicle*, 31 May 1910, p. 8. By the mid 1910s several collections of Noguchi's English poems had been published.

⁵¹ Noguchi, *English Writings*, II, 68. First published as *The Spirit of Japanese Poetry* in London in 1914.

⁵² Review of *The Spirit of Romance*, *Morning Post*, 1 August 1910; cited in *A language*, p. 122.

⁵³ Noguchi, *English Letters*, p. 211 (2 September 1911).

Bottomley's translations of the English version of a Welsh lyric: 'It is not you, & it is not the Welsh lyric.'⁵⁴

Such an appreciation of ellipses in written work also holds true for Thomas in the case of oral and traditional literature. This is indicated by his praise in *Hearn* of Hearn's retold Japanese stories, which Thomas describes as containing 'that slight something absent which suggests the translation from a remote language'. It is also implicit in his comments on his own paraphrased *Celtic Stories*, which he was working on at the same time as *Hearn*.⁵⁵ In the 'Note on Sources' in *Celtic Stories*, he writes that 'it is one of the charms under the surface of these stories that we can feel, even if we can never trace, a pedigree of dimmest antiquity behind them.'⁵⁶

Thomas also uses absence usually in the form of ellipses to measure the success of original work. Like Wordsworth, he sees the poet as 'in the situation of a translator'.⁵⁷ This is almost literally true in the case of Noguchi, who was writing poetry in his second language. Thomas was attracted to this sense of foreignness in Noguchi's work, observing in a review of him that 'we wondered how he could learn English and yet be so little tinged by our use of the language.'⁵⁸ He made similar remarks about Frost's American English, singling out, in his praise of Frost's poetry, the elliptical quality of Frost's 'good natural English with just that shade of foreignness'.⁵⁹

The relation between the elliptical effect encouraged by Japanese aesthetics, the influence of those aesthetics on early twentieth-century poetry written in English, and the elliptical quality that Thomas identifies in both Noguchi and Frost's writings in English are confirmed by a performance, in Japanese, of one of Frost's poems a hundred years later. 'The Death of the Hired Man', which appeared in Frost's 1914 collection *North of Boston*, and which, Thomas wrote, 'put Mr Frost above all other writers of verse in America', was rewritten by *The No East West Company* in the early twenty-first century as an English Noh play entitled *Silas ... the Hired Man*, the

⁵⁴ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 75 (18 January 1905).

⁵⁵ *Hearn*, p. 78.

⁵⁶ *Celtic Stories*, pp. 127-8.

⁵⁷ Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Methuen, 1963), preface of 1802, p. 251.

⁵⁸ *Daily Chronicle*, 31 May 1910, p. 8.

⁵⁹ Thomas to John Freeman, 14 August 1914, cited in Stan Smith, p. 12.

ellipses an apt reminder of the aesthetic of absence. This English Noh play was first performed in Kyoto in January 2005.⁶⁰

Both Frost and Noguchi's work is written in an English not familiar to Thomas, and so is closer, in his eyes, to translated work. However, this is not the case with Bottomley's writings, and, in a review of Bottomley's poetry, Thomas emphasises further the relation between ellipses and poetry. In this review, he distinguishes poetry from 'the amplification of prose' by means of its 'sensuous and elliptical forms'.⁶¹ In his book, *Feminine Influence on the Poets*, he also echoes Wordsworth's metaphor of poetry as translation, writing, when relating original sonnets to the writer's personal experiences, as follows:

A man would give much to have a complete intimate account of the private life of a sonneteer during the period of conception and composition. This account might be printed on one side of the page and the sonnets on the other, like original and translation.⁶²

So, in completed translations, paraphrases and original work, Thomas places a high value on elliptical absence. He appears to see the completed poem as only part of an unseen work. This unseen work is indicated by ellipses in the same way that ellipses indicate the words not yet arrived at within a draft.

Thomas often uses metaphorical ellipses in his original work, frequently in the form of asides encased within further asides, as if forming a nest of Russian *Matryoshka* dolls. He does this in order to alert the reader to the potential unwritten text that lies behind a work, and to the existence of alternative forms of articulation. In other words, he is informing the reader that ellipses are present in that work. Often these *Matryoshka*-like asides refer to ellipses that are formed because of limitations in Thomas's writing, either due to practical considerations such as restrictions imposed by publishers' demands, or due to a personal sense of creative belatedness.

In *The South Country*, for example, one such *Matryoshka*-like aside reads: 'I mention these trivial things because they may be important to those who read what I am paid for writing' (*SC*, 5). In this way, Thomas is able to refer to the restrictions imposed upon him as a commissioned writer. In another passage, a similar aside refers

⁶⁰ Review of Frost's *North of Boston*, *Daily News*, 22 July 1914; cited in *A language*, p. 127; 'The Death of the Hired Man', adapted as a Noh play, was performed at Oe Noh Gagudo theatre, Kyoto, 16 January 2005. See The No East West Company, www.geocities.com/no_east_west.

⁶¹ Unsigned review of Bottomley's poetry, *Chambers of Imagery*, 'Verses and Translations', *Daily Chronicle*, 5 August 1907, p. 2.

⁶² *Feminine Influence on the Poets* (London: Martin Secker, 1910), pp. 97-8.

to creative belatedness, expressed as the failure to create an original place-name. Its content is confirmed by the inclusion, just prior to the aside, of the same place-name as one of a list of names in the 'south country':

Lydiard Millicent, Clevancy, Amesbury, Amberley (I once tried to make a beautiful name and in the end it was Amberley, in which Time had forestalled me); what sweet names Penshurst, Frensham, Firle, Nutley, Appleshaw, Hambledon, Cranbrook, Fordingbridge, Melksham, Lambourne, Draycot, Buscot, Kelmscot, Yatton, Yalding, Downe, Cowden, Iping, Cowfold, Ashe, Liss.... Then there are the histories of roads. (*SC*, 148)

This forty-word place-name list in *The South Country* itself comprises an aside within the main text.

The South Country was commissioned by the publisher Joseph Malaby Dent. Thomas records how he promised Dent to 'scatter *real place names* plentifully'.⁶³ By including such a long list, and by referring within it to his own belatedness as a creator, Thomas not only fulfils his publisher's demands, but also asserts his own identity as a creative composing writer rather than as a commissioned journalist. In addition, it allows him to acknowledge the body of oral literature that lies behind such compositions. As a result, he is able, as noted earlier, to indicate to the reader by means of elliptical asides that there are alternative ways of describing that countryside, one alternative mode of articulation being these lists of '*real place names*' and the descriptions encased in such place-names, referred to by Thomas as these 'poems which are place-names' (*SC*, 148). By making these lists so long, Thomas ensures that they have considerable impact on the flow of the main text, and that they edge, momentarily, from an elliptical to a central position. A similar destabilisation of apparent authority within the text is achieved by Thomas in his use of the device of multiple personae in *The South Country* and in other prose books, and, in particular, of his use of reported speech within reported speech, when a narrator recounts the tales of the various characters he has met.

In *The South Country*, Thomas also undermines the authority of the main text by asides that remind the reader of his situation as commissioned writer. This highlights the provisionality of the main text as a description of the countryside, and, indeed, the provisionality of any such attempt. The typographical ellipses into which the place-name list eventually drops also indicate this: 'Cowfold, Ashe, Liss....'. The

⁶³ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 165 (19 July 1908). Thomas's emphasis.

reader is left with an impression of virtual endlessness. The list could go on and on. This impression again corroborates Thomas's sense of creative belatedness and creative insignificance as an individual writer. He can only share in what has already been created. The list is presented as part of a larger unwritten whole, not simply of the written work in which it is inserted, but, like Thomas's 'But these things also', of a longer unwritten list of which the printed text only provides a glimpse. There is a clear parallel with the writing of poetry, whether it be the sense of the words that have not yet been written, or parts of the poem that remain unwritten but present, even when that poem is completed.

Aporia

The forest foxglove is purple, the marguerite
Outside is gold and white,
Nor can those that pluck either blossom greet
The others, day or night. (*CP*, 349)

Edward Thomas

Alan Bass's gloss of Jacques Derrida's employment of the term 'aporia' in *Writing and Difference* provides a useful description of its use in this thesis. Bass describes aporia as 'an excess which cannot be constructed within the rules of logic, for the excess can only be conceived as *neither* this *nor* that, or both at the same time – a departure from all rules of logic'.⁶⁴

In this thesis, the term 'aporia' is used to refer to absences that are totally inaccessible, expressed as interruptions, contradictions or doubtful areas which present impassable barriers to further expression. This is distinct from the use of the term 'ellipses'. Ellipses, as noted earlier, do not cover what cannot be said, since they indicate the absence of text from the work in which they are contained. Ellipses invite the reader to fill them in, and so suggest the existence of an unwritten text that is potentially available. The implication is that such work is greater than its written parts. However, when the paradoxes and doubtful resonances of ellipses, 'trailing off or fading away', form irresolvable logical difficulties and expressions of doubt that cannot be resolved, they become aporia, the repository of uncertainty or 'impassable'

⁶⁴ Bass, in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), translator's introduction, pp. xvi-xvii.

barriers, as their etymological history indicates.⁶⁵ As a result, in keeping with their identity as markers of omission and doubt, the dividing line between aporia and ellipses is blurred, and, as will be seen, a text may often exhibit both aporetic and elliptical qualities at the same time. Nevertheless, since their use reveals different aspects of the composing process, it is worth examining their effects separately.

of present absence

Well, you know, you have only to look. Claude is the artist
who knows there is no painting the sun itself, and so he
chooses the moment after the sun has set, or has hid
behind a cloud, and its light fills the sky, and that light he
suggests as no other painter ever could.⁶⁶

James McNeill Whistler

Thomas's appreciation of aporia is indicated in his praise of the tralatitious uncertainty of the linguistic relations between individual words in Yone Noguchi's poetry:

His world is his own. It is a nebulous, changeful one where few things
retain their customary values and frequently lose their individuality
altogether. In *My Heart* he is uncertain whether a sound be that of his
heart or of the sea, of his tears or of 'the rain carrying tragedy from
heaven'. A footstep heard is 'grey and soft.' He does not ask if the voice
of his mother is heard in the wind, but 'Is the wind my mother lost?'⁶⁷

It is worth noting, given Thomas's emphasis on the quality of absence in work he admires, that the features he singles out for admiration here are also possessed by the Japanese *kakekotoba*. The *kakekotoba* itself epitomises the ambiguities that lie at the core of Japanese grammatical constructions, literature and aesthetics, as reflected by Chamberlain when he writes of Japanese poetry that 'the impression produced by these linked verses is delightful in the extreme, passing as they do before the reader like a series of dissolving views, vague, graceful, and suggestive.'⁶⁸ These ambiguities are reflected also in Thomas's subscription to a Keatsian 'uncertainty', and his determination to focus in his writing on the border between language and the pre-

⁶⁵ See Kahn, p. 207; the *OED* cites the Greek etymological root of aporia as 'impassable', *OED*, 1 (1961), 390.

⁶⁶ Cited in Elisabeth Robins Pennell and Joseph Pennell, *The Life of James McNeill Whistler*, 2 vols (London: Heinemann, 1908), II, p. 178. 'Claude' is the seventeenth-century landscape painter, Claude Lorrain.

⁶⁷ *Daily Chronicle*, 31 May 1910, p. 8.

⁶⁸ Basil Hall Chamberlain, ed., *Classical Poetry of the Japanese* (London: Trübner, 1880). p. 6. This passage is cited by W. G. Aston, p. 202.

linguistic, that moment prior to a poem's emergence into words, which necessarily involves a focus on what is not said and on what cannot be said.⁶⁹

Thomas's tale 'The Castle of Lostormellyn' provides an apt illustration of a writer's attempts to articulate, or perceive, this pre-linguistic moment, and of any attempt to articulate areas that remain on the margins of the attention. The prince of the tale, in search of 'that which is most worthy', is directed from castle to castle in an ever-extending quest, his destination always the castle on the horizon. Consequently, he never fulfils his quest.⁷⁰ This story can be read as an analogy of Thomas's experiences when composing. By determining to focus on what is marginal, Thomas has to grapple with the fact that, once, like the castle, such marginal areas are placed in the centre of attention, they are stripped of their marginality. As a result of this, the poet interested in articulating what is peripheral to the attention then needs to approach new marginal areas.

In his poetry, Thomas often chooses to write in the first person, and so tackles the question of aporia, and his attempts to articulate oblivion and what lies beyond words, in a more direct way. Aporia make up much of the content of these poems, commonly represented by the trope of the forest. As Harry Coombes observes,

'forest' in Thomas's poetry is the dark region of human experience which cannot be illuminated by thought or reason, a pathless regions; it is the gulf of nothingness or eternity that waits behind the temporal and the tangible; or it is simply sleep, or death.⁷¹

One example is in the poem 'Lights Out', which describes

the borders of sleep,
The unfathomable deep
Forest where all must lose
Their way (CP, 367)

The action in a number of Thomas's poems, such as 'Out in the dark', 'Lights' Out', 'The Dark Forest' and 'The Green Roads', occurs on the edge of forests, revolving around the moment of entering them, and the impossibility of returning from them.

'The Green Roads', for example, records

marks left behind by some one gone into the forest
To show his track.
But he has never come back. (CP, 343)

⁶⁹ See, for example, Michael Kirkham, *The Imagination of Edward Thomas* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 81-2, p. 213. See also Edward Thomas, *Keats* (London: Jack, 1916), p. 74, where he cites Keats' definition of negative capability.

⁷⁰ *Light*, pp. 174-189.

⁷¹ Coombes, p. 220.

In 'The Green Roads', Thomas resolves the contradiction implicit in attempts to articulate aporia by setting himself apart, like the 'superfluous' man he describes in *The South Country*, to look on from the outside and record what happens:

all things forget the forest
Excepting perhaps me, when now I see

The old man, the child, the goose feathers at the edge of the forest. (CP, 343)

In this way, his ability to record appears inextricably linked to his position as outsider. The implication is that the act of articulation distances him from the experience he observes. However, in subsequent poems the uncertainty as to what can be articulated grows until it reaches the point where it includes, in an act of final aposiopesis, the poet's own self, a development that chillingly reflects the uncertainties facing Thomas in his personal situation as a soldier bound for the Front. In 'Lights Out', he records his own entry into the forest and into oblivion:

That I may lose my way
And myself. (CP, 367)

In '4 Helen', he refers to 'myself, too, if I could find /Where it lay hidden' (CP, 299). 'Out in the dark' describes the threat of the haunting dark forest in which 'all else is drowned' (CP, 375).⁷²

of language breakdown

His greatest hope, to become a poet without words.⁷³
Yone Noguchi

A number of Thomas's poems go further, enacting the way an attempt at articulation can undermine its own objective by obstructing further articulation. This occurs most often as a result of duplication or repetition of words. The 'achieved irresolvability' that Christopher Ricks refers to in 'Old Man' is linked to the way that the sufficiency of each plant name included in this poem is challenged by its juxtaposition with synonyms.⁷⁴ As the names multiply, the confusion intensifies. In the first two lines, the phrase 'Old Man, or Lad's-love' is reversed and repeated as 'Lad's-love, or Old Man'. This sets the stage for a list of further alternative names. While appearing to

⁷² '4 Helen', 'The Green Roads', 'Lights Out' and 'Out in the dark' were all written in 1916. Thomas went to the Front in January 1917.

⁷³ Noguchi commenting on Bashō, the master of haiku, in Noguchi, *English Writings*, II, 56. First published in *The Spirit of Japanese Poetry* in London in 1914.

⁷⁴ Christopher Ricks, *T. S. Eliot and Prejudice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 146.

celebrate these names, the list also exposes their fundamental emptiness. The physical positioning of the plant names in juxtaposition to each other reveals their superficiality. This occurs as the poem moves from the detailed 'the hoar-green feathery herb, almost a tree' to 'the thing it is' to 'the herb' to 'the bush' to 'a low thick bush', and, finally, prefixed with a negative, 'no hoar-green bush' (*CP*, 19, 21). The effect is similar to that achieved by the list of forty place-names in *The South Country*. In *The South Country*, these place-names are both part of the final composition and call attention to it as a composition. In 'Old Man', however, there is no need for an authorial aside to highlight its status as a composed piece of work since the whole poem is concerned with the subject of naming.

A similar effect is achieved in 'Lob':

There were three Manningfords, - Abbots, Bohun, and Bruce:
And whether Alton, not Manningford, it was
My memory could not decide, because
There was both Alton Barnes and Alton Priors.
All had their churches, graveyards, farms, and byres,
Lurking to one side up the paths and lanes (*CP*, 159)

The same name carries such different meanings, each obscuring each, that the speaker, or as Thomas specifically phrases it, the speaker's memory, cannot decide between them. This point is taken further later in 'Lob' when 'Hog's Back' is used to refer both to a place that currently holds that name and to the same place before it was named: "'Twas he first called the Hog's Back the Hog's Back' (*CP*, 163). The effect is curious. The sentence blocks itself. There is a sense of obstructed progression, of language jamming or breaking down. 'Hog's Back' is obliged to do double duty, both as a reference to the present named place, and as a reference to its past existence as a nameless place. The repetition of this name, therefore, reinforces the sense of the inaccessible remoteness of a pre-linguistic world. Necessarily, in Thomas's attempts to articulate that pre-linguistic state, he makes use of the very names that supersede that state, and so sabotages his own attempt at articulation. The name obstructs as much as or more than it elucidates.

In *Maurice Maeterlinck*, Thomas writes that 'no word, outside works of information, has any value beyond its surface value except what it receives from its neighbours and its position among them.'⁷⁵ This is demonstrated in 'Old Man' and 'Lob'. Repetition deprives a word of neighbours and of a 'position among them'. It

⁷⁵*Maurice Maeterlinck* (London: Methuen, 1911), p. 27.

exposes their 'surface value', revealing the emptiness behind it. As Stuart Sillars puts it, with reference to 'Old Man', the effect is 'the tearing away of language from object' and 'the beginning of a process of aporia'.⁷⁶ So, the act of naming in lists or duplicated phrases helps to create even while it attempts to dispel aporia.

Since, as Sillars's reference to a 'process of aporia' suggests, this remains a procedure in the making even in the completed poem, it is not surprising to discover that such procedures can also be found in the composing process. Their importance to the composing process is emphasised by Thomas in his comments on Bottomley's plays. He fêtes Bottomley's *The Crier By Night*, as 'brilliant', hovering 'on the verge of what is probably inexpressible', but he attributes what he sees as a critical lack of aporetic uncertainty in Bottomley's later play, *King Lear's Wife*, to a composing process that was too driven by its writer when attempting to fill the emptiness that Thomas exposes in 'Old Man' and 'Lob'.⁷⁷ Writing to Frost, Thomas complains that Bottomley's *King Lear's Wife* 'was all the result of thinking out an explanation' and 'it is made up. B. had thought out the motives'.⁷⁸

Deliberate exposure and acceptance of the superficiality inherent in printed texts also allows the writer to make room for potential, but invisible, alternative texts. Thomas refers to this when he comments on his own writing process to Bottomley. He notes that

while I write, it is a dull blindfold faring through a strange lovely land: I seem to take what I write from the dictation of someone else. Correction is pleasanter then for I have glimpses of what I was passing through as I wrote.⁷⁹

The glimpses Thomas has of the work he has just written are physically embodied in an image in a passage in his book, *Beautiful Wales*, of the hardly visible outline of a mountain. He writes: 'And outside, the noises of a west wind and a flooded stream, the whimper of an otter, and the long, slow laugh of an owl; and always silent, but never forgotten, the restless, towering outline of a mountain.'⁸⁰ Curiously, by emphasising this barely perceptible background, the exact detail of the foreground 'whimper' or 'laugh' is brought into focus.

⁷⁶ *Structure and Dissolution in English Writing, 1910-1920* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p. 179.

⁷⁷ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 41 (10 November 1902).

⁷⁸ Thomas to Frost, *Electd Friends: R.F. & E.T.*, pp. 131-2 (21 May 1916), p. 138 (10 June 1916).

⁷⁹ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 53 (17 March 1904).

⁸⁰ *Beautiful Wales* (London: Black's Colour Book Series, 1905), p. 42.

of uncertainty

L'objet et le sujet sont donc irrémédiablement mouvants,
insaisissables et insaisissants.⁸¹

Jules Laforgue

Aporetic contradictions are rife in Thomas's writing. Addressing readers directly in convoluted sentences with *Matryoshka*-like asides, he frequently appears first to offer them an interpretation, then to cancel it, and then to throw doubt upon the validity of that cancellation. The result is that few of his statements about his work can be taken as definitive. One example of this is the apparently throwaway phrase 'or so I fancy' that ends his abrupt cancellation of an interpretation of 'Out in the dark'. This addition of 'so I fancy' indicates a possible reversal of all that he has just expressed. He writes:

It is really Baba [his younger daughter] who speaks, not I. Something she felt put me onto it. But I am afraid I am meddling now. A real poem would include and imply all these things I am writing, or so I fancy.⁸²

Not only Thomas's interpretation of his poetry but the poetry itself remains so much in uncertainty that a number of his titles, such as 'It was upon' and 'When first', are cut short of specific meaning. They appear to be still in the process of being formed. As noted previously, some of his editors have since taken liberties with this characteristic of Thomas's poem titles, extending editorial licence in posthumous editions of his work to alteration of these titles, as admitted by R.G. Thomas in his introduction to the 1978 Clarendon Press *Collected Poems*: 'occasionally I have used titles based on references in his [Thomas's] letters.'⁸³

The looseness with which Thomas regards his own titles results in a number of instances of duplication that to some degree have the same effect as the repetition of 'Hog's Back' in 'Lob' and the duplication of plant names in 'Old Man'. Editors of his work mostly agree that there are two poems entitled 'Digging'; two called 'An Old Song'; two called 'Song' (although R. G. Thomas has three); two named 'Home'; and a third "'Home'" that is distinguished from its siblings by an additional pair of

⁸¹ 'L'Impressionisme', in *Mélanges Posthumes* (Paris: Société du Mercure de France, 1903; repr. Geneva: Slatkine, 1979), pp. 133-145 (p. 141). 'Object and subject are then irretrievably in motion, inapprehensible and unapprehending.' English translation by William Jay Smith, cited in Linda Nochlin, *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism 1874 - 1904* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 15.

⁸² *Last Four Years*, 1916, p. 237 (27 December).

⁸³ *CP*, introduction, p. xxx. See Pikoulis, 'On Editing Edward Thomas', *PN Review* 103, 21.5 (1995), 52-56 (p. 52); also, Judy Kendall, 'A Breath of Air', *PN Review* 164, 31.6 (2005), 62 (p. 62). For a list of significant alterations in the titles in the 1978 *Collected Poems*, see Appendix A, following the introduction to this thesis.

quotation marks.⁸⁴ These identically titled pieces are separate poems, but their identical titles indicate Thomas's distrust of the act of definitive naming, reflected also in his choice of '*Poems*' as title of the collection. However, the fact that only one of each group of poems is selected by Thomas for publication in the 1917 *Poems* suggests that he intends his works to be considered as provisional rather than completed pieces, or as closely connected versions of a similar subject or theme.⁸⁵

Where titles are repeated, the later poems seem to contain more uncertainty and ambiguity, and when selecting and ordering poems for his 1917 collection, Thomas shows a preference for this increased complexity. Longley has observed this, noting that the structure of the second 'Old Song', the poem selected for the collection, 'contrasts with the homogenousness of Thomas's first 'Old Song'.⁸⁶ A similar incremental shift in uncertainty can be found in the three 'Home' poems. In the third poem "'Home'", that uncertainty is so strong that, as noted above, it appears as qualifying quotation marks round the title of the poem. Once again, it is only this last, and most uncertain, 'Home' poem that is selected by Thomas for the 1917 *Poems*.

Although neither of the two 'Digging' poems was selected for the 1917 *Poems*, the shift in subject between them follows a similar trajectory in terms of greater intricacy of development. The first evokes autumn through imagery of scents released by digging. The metaphor of digging is also used in the second poem, but it digs deeper than the first, uncovering further layers as it questions concepts of time. As Longley describes it, the second 'Digging' poem presents an act of 'imaginative archaeology [that] uncovers the common humanity, and inhumanity, that links the ages'.⁸⁷ The implication is that, for Thomas, the looseness of his titles and the uncertainty present in the poems are in fact crucial components of a completed piece, just as his criticism of Bottomley's *King Lear's Wife* indicates that he sees uncertainty as an important part of the composing process.

⁸⁴ R. G. Thomas also entitles "Early one morning in May I set out" as 'Song [3]' in *CP*, p. 333.

⁸⁵ The fact that Thomas selects both 'Song [2]' and 'Song [3]' for the 1917 collection and gives 'Song [3]' the title 'Early one morning' casts further doubt on R. G. Thomas's decision to use the same title of 'Song' for both.

⁸⁶ *Poems and Last Poems*, notes, p. 179.

⁸⁷ *Poems and Last Poems*, notes, p. 294.

of fore- and background

To leave the page covered, and the silence intact⁸⁸

Don Paterson

The powerful effect of an introduction of and increase in aporetic uncertainty, and the related exposure of the emptiness that lies behind printed text, is both graphically and kinetically drawn out in the drafts of a poem from my *The Drier The Brighter* collection, entitled 'how your whole life'. Progressive drafts of this poem show aporia forming during the process of composing.

The initial draft of this poem consists of a relatively ordinary series of elliptical *cris de coeur*, which rely solely on their incompleteness for their effect. The last and most incomplete line of this rather limp draft seems the strongest, due to the self-cancelling aposiopesis it employs. The explanatory 'how' is cut short by 'not even that':

how your whole life can be ripped apart
how you can't trust anyone
how the only mind you know is your own
how not even that⁸⁹

This aposiopesis inspires subsequent drafts. Slight editing and simple rearrangement of the sentences across the line-breaks ensure a gradual increase of difficulty in deciphering the thought, transforming this developing poem into a much more engaging piece, as the element of uncertainty becomes more central to it:

how
yourwholelife
isrippeda
parhowyoucanno
longertrustany
onehowtheonlymin
dyouknowisyo
urshownote
venth
at⁹⁰

The focus in this draft has shifted to some degree from the sense of the lines to their shape as they are arranged and rearranged across the page, and to a series of alternative readings simultaneously offered and denied by this rearrangement. The increased difficulty of engaging with the poem ensures a deeper engagement. As the

⁸⁸ 'Aphorisms', in Herbert, pp. 282-2, (p. 283).

⁸⁹ Records, filed under 'howyourwhole', 19 November 2003.

⁹⁰ *Brighter*, p. 249.

lines continue, they become increasingly difficult to read out. In addition, invisible unheard alternative extensions of each line are more strongly suggested. Line four, as 'parthowyoucanno', seems to offer the word 'cannot' as an alternative to 'can/no[]longer'; in line six, 'min' could be 'minute' instead of 'min/d', and line nine is almost unrecognisable, suggesting itself as a fragment of 'seventh' or 'eleventh' as much as 'e/ven[]th/at'. In this way, the printed letters appear to belong to other words, words that are blanked out in this text, half-read, half-understood lines – like the sign on a bus glimpsed down another street.

This detailed attention to shaped space has a strong effect on the text. Alteration of line endings and eradication of word-boundaries throw the shape of the poem into sharper relief, and intensify the reader's first experience of the poem as a spatial form rather than a logical unfolding of linguistically expressed ideas. Another effect of this unusual shaping is that the initial moments, when a reader witnesses the physical form of the piece before beginning to read the semantic sequence of the words contained in it, are extended.

In a later digitally-animated version of 'how your whole life', the relationship between the words and the surrounding space undergoes a further disruption.⁹¹ The font of the text is changed so that the lines resemble a series of roughly-positioned newspaper cuttings of different font sizes. The words are progressively obscured by means of interactive intervention by the reader. The effect partly depends on the reader's initial lack of awareness that her successive movements with the mouse are instigating this intervention, and on her attempts, when she realises this, to reverse those movements, a reaction that in fact exacerbates the intervention. After some briefing on my version of this poem on the page, Steven Earnshaw worked alone on the digitalisation of this piece, so my first response to his efforts approximates to some degree the experience of an initial reader:

The wording and background – graffiti-like, the wall with the faint writing, the way it reads and doesn't read as words on a page – you get the feel perfectly!, and then that red spotting (that is such an unexpected masterstroke!) which at first I don't notice as I am scrutinising the words and then I try to stop by clicking again and again to get back to what now seems like the clean pre-red page and only make it worse.

In the end I exited and entered again because I couldn't bear it!
Am I right that I can only see the words again if I click and move the pointer so the red is bound to appear?

⁹¹ For the animated version, a collaboration between myself and digital artist, Steven Earnshaw, see Earnshaw, *Flash Art Gallery*, www.shu.ac.uk/schools/cs/teaching/sle/earnshaw/gallery/.

It gives exactly the feel of the piece I wrote, when I wrote it - really takes me back to that nightmarish feeling of having lost something you thought you had and being unable to get it back.

Do you know Dr Seuss and the pink snow - he tries to get rid of it by scooping it up but only creates more pink where he has scooped - it brought that book back to me too.⁹²

Earnshaw's reply to me indicates that, even after this reading, I was still not fully aware of the detail of my intervention in the piece:

Your description of the way it works is amazingly accurate – I don't know the Seuss but it's quite apt. You don't need to click by the way, you just need to keep the mouse moving... because if you don't move...⁹³

However, as I note, although the experiences of reading this poem on the page and reading on the screen are hugely different, the digital piece still 'really takes me back' and I can recognise 'exactly the feel of the piece I wrote, when I wrote it'. This indicates that the disruptions present in the digital piece are also part of the initial composing process, even if not discernible in the records left by early drafts.

The kinetic effect in the digital 'how your whole life' occurs in many interactive digital poems, which often consist of text that literally slips in and out of the screen, drops down, fragments or disappears.⁹⁴ In addition, the sequences in which these movements occur may vary each time the poem is viewed, producing a very fluid piece that remains in process. The random occurrence of such movements also results in a loss of readerly control. This, in fact, reflects the experience of composing poetry more closely than most experiences of reading a fixed text of a poem printed on the page.

In digital poetry, such effects are almost inevitable, but Thomas's apparently casual re-use of poetry titles, his frequent repetition of the first few words of a poem instead of a separate title, or his omission of a title altogether, are all indications of a desire on his part to approximate the composing process as nearly as he can, throwing into question any attempts to view the work as finished.

⁹² Kendall to Earnshaw, Email on Web Poetry Collaboration, Earnshaw and others (held by the researcher, 2002 – 2005), 22 January 2004, hereafter referred to as Email on Web Poetry. This documentation was compiled at the same time as the *Brighter* documentation and includes a number of the poems also appearing in *Brighter*.

⁹³ Earnshaw to Kendall, Email on Web Poetry, 23 January 2004.

⁹⁴ See 'Dandelion Vision', in Earnshaw, *PROOF*, www.shu.ac.uk/proof/; also, 'The Reckless Sleeper' and 'Plough's Progress', in Earnshaw, www.shu.ac.uk/schools/cs/teaching/sle/earnshaw/gallery/.

Conclusion

In 'how your whole life', the development through subsequent drafts of the powerful effect of the aposiopesis in the last line of the first draft leads to a point where the aporia produced by it take over the whole poem. This recalls the way the elliptical evidence of spring in the body of Thomas's 'But these things also' appears to have pushed conventional emblems out of the printed text of the poem, and the way each successive name in 'Old Man' dislodges its predecessor. By highlighting the essential marginality of the printed words within them, turning the words into frames for other invisible parts of the poems, these poems raise questions about context. A similar process is in evidence in Thomas's description of trees and sky in the following passage from *Beautiful Wales*: 'Tall hedgerow elms and orchard trees held blue fragments of the sky among their leaves and hid the rest.'⁹⁵ The sky is not seen as part of the background, but is foregrounded. It turns into physical fragments that are outlined by branches. Similarly, the branches are pushed from their position as figures in the foreground to the background, and their main purpose becomes that of marking the divisions between the 'blue fragments' of sky. Thus, the perspectives shift, like Ludwig Wittgenstein's perceptually ambiguous duck-rabbit figure, the branches becoming frames for the sky.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ *Beautiful Wales*, p. 166.

⁹⁶ The duck-rabbit figure, perceived either as a duck or as a rabbit but not as both simultaneously, was originally introduced by the Gestalt psychologist Joseph Jastrow and published in *Fact and Fable in Psychology* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1900). It was later utilised as an illustration of aspect perception or interpretive 'seeing as' in 1953 by Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), pp. 193-6, p. 197 (Part II, Section 11). The similar figure of a young-old woman is thought to have been adapted by British cartoonist W. E. Hill, who published it in 1915, from an original concept that was popular throughout the world on trading and puzzle cards. Its earliest known appearance is on an anonymous German postcard dated 1888. The figure was later altered and adapted by the two psychologists Robert W. Leeper and E. G. Boring in 1930 and is now often referred to as the 'Boring figure'. For more on this and the relation between 'figure and ground', see E. G. Boring, 'A New Ambiguous Figure', *American Journal of Psychology*, 42 (1930), 444-445.

Appendix D

An account of the drafting of 'Building' in my unpublished paper 'Searching for the Invisible'

I did not know if the verb I needed existed, but I knew it was what the pattern required for its completion. I encouraged in myself various automatic responses to efforts to continue the phrase 'the tram ran him over' in a search for the 'right' verb: eg 'the tram ran him over to see me/ to visit London/ to London'. I did not, in this instance, resort to the artificial aid of a dictionary or lexical reference book, though this is a strategy I sometimes use. I process generated a number of words habitually used to complete the phrase 'the tram ran him over'. As each word presented itself, it was either immediately rejected, or accepted for some time and then rejected. Successive words veered more and more from the habitual ('I ran him over to sing' for example), but none fitted all the criteria. In the end I felt I had to give up. I sensed that I had run out of habitual responses. My attention had shifted from this task and I became involved in unrelated physical and mental activities (riding a bicycle, admiring the autumn leaves and mentally running over the points of the lecture I was about to give). As I was immersed in these other activities, a verb appeared in my mind that fitted all the criteria.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Kendall, Records, filed under 'inv18', 15 March 2004.

Appendix E

1 Gross's comments on a draft of 'absence of birdsong'

What would I have taken from this if I hadn't read your mail first? - wish I'd done the experiment. Would it be crass to write the clue in, as in (purely a try-out, not a suggestion):

As before the ritual of suppuku [am I right here?]

exquisitely phrased

ah, death poem! ⁹⁸

2 The first, second, third and fourth drafts of 'absence of birdsong'

I

The trains and traffic start to shake the house at around about 6.45 am

I am at the computer, my fingers also shaking you could say but
in a predetermined totally controlled way as I type
the computer power is whirring
no birdsong yet - it is february
and no one else up in this small block of flats, that I can hear
the clock is ticking softly

II

just after 6.00 am the trains and traffic start to shake the house

there is no birdsong yet - it is february
but the clock ticks softly
and the blood whistles through my ears

III

At 6.00 am the trains and traffic start to shake the house.
There is no birdsong but the clock ticks softly, and blood whistles through
the ears.

IV

At 6.00 am the traffic starts to shake the room,
there is no birdsong,
a clock ticks softly, blood whistles through the ears. ⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Gross, Email Responses, 22 February 2004.

⁹⁹ Kendall, Records, filed under 'Quietness', 8, 10, 12, 13 February 2004.

Appendix F

The initial draft of 'One Minute's'

11.11
11.05 am
surface of a cup
Twinings traditional
the Imperial War Museum café:
leaves, lawn, birch
a window view
undisturbed
by tears ¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Kendall, Records, filed under '11^11', 11 November 2002.

CHAPTER THREE Absence II: gaps and unfinishedness

murmurs of hushed poetry that wait
On stillness to express what sound must lose¹
Gordon Bottomley

The best craftsmanship always leaves holes and gaps in
the works of the poem so that something that is *not* in the
poem can creep, crawl, flash, or thunder in²
Dylan Thomas

Just as the division between ellipses and aporia is not always clear, so ellipses, aporia, and also aposiopesis could all come under the term ‘gaps’ and are, in fact, marked by physical or metaphorical gaps. However, the dictionary and etymological definitions of ‘gap’ clearly distinguish it from other forms of absence. It is an ‘open mouth, also opening, chasm’, ‘an unfilled space or interval; a blank’ and ‘a break in continuity’.³ This suggests that when a gap forms part of a work, it does not, like ellipses and aporia, simply signify omission or irresolution. Instead, it becomes the omitted thing, appearing as a particular and present shape within the work. So, although ‘gap’ can be used as a generic term that includes ellipses and aporia, the more specific use of it in this thesis denotes a shift in emphasis from what is missing to what is present.

Similarly, the aesthetic of unfinishedness can also be applied to ellipses and aporia. Both could be described as inherently unfinished parts of the written text. However, this thesis also employs a more specific use of the term ‘unfinishedness’ to refer to the particular if invisible shape of a work that extends beyond its visible written parts. Such work merits the description ‘unfinished’ because it is only partly visible. As a result, if account is only taken of the visible written part, the work will appear unfinished.

¹ ‘To Yone Noguchi, with a copy of *Midsummer’s Eve*’, *Poems and Plays*, p. 73.

² ‘Notes on the Art of Poetry’, in Herbert, p. 116. Author’s emphasis.

³ See the entry for ‘gap’, *OED*, IV (1961), 48.

Mind the gap

I passed the horizon ridge
To a new country, the path I had to find
By half-gaps that were stiles once in the hedge. (CP, 77)
Edward Thomas

Gaps occur when an absence is framed or outlined in some way so that, instead of acting as an elliptic indicator of what is omitted, the absence becomes a physical presence in the poem, as in the transformation in *Beautiful Wales* of background sky into a foregrounded figure framed by branches. A similar effect is indicated by the Japanese aesthetic of *ma*, 'space' or 'interval'. *Ma* refers to absence as presence as in, for example, the blank spaces left on the page of a printed poem. These blank spaces themselves form an important part of the final work. The resonance that Thomas feels with this Japanese aesthetic is evident in his appreciation of 'that slight something absent' as a measure of a good piece of translation or original work, and in his description of the 'Japanesy suddenness of ending' of the last line of 'The long small room', which reads: 'The hundred last leaves stream upon the willow.'⁴ In the first draft of this poem there is no previous reference to the willow in the visible printed text of the poem. The connection between the willow and the rest of the poem remains inarticulated in the interval between the lines. Similar leaps in the printed text from one subject to another occur in the sudden switches in subject between refrain and verses in both Thomas's 'Old Song' poems and in the unexpectedness of the endings of 'Up in the Wind' and 'Cock-Crow'. However, Thomas is aware of the foreignness of this 'Japanesy' quality for an English readership. After receiving Eleanor Farjeon's response to the line in the first draft of 'The long small room', he writes: 'I am worried about the impression the willow made on you', and modifies the effect of its sudden appearance by introducing willows into the first printed line of the poem as well.⁵

⁴ Thomas, *Hearn*, p. 78; *Last Four Years*, p. 221.

⁵ *Last Four Years*, p. 221, p. 222.

: *that really exists*

I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry ⁶
John Cage

With that bamboo needle
She knits all space, piece by piece,
Hastily hauling time in.⁷
Shinkichi Takahashi

In terms of his employment of gaps, another influence on Thomas can be found in the work of William James, whom Thomas quoted in his writings.⁸ The following passage from James's *The Principles of Psychology* serves as a good description of the role played by gaps in the composing process. James writes:

Suppose we try to recall a forgotten name. The state of our consciousness is peculiar. There is a gap therein; but no mere gap. It is a gap that is intensely active. A sort of wraith of a name is in it, beckoning us in a given direction, making us at moments tingle with the sense of our closeness, and then letting us sink back without the longed-for term. If the wrong names are proposed to us this singular gap acts immediately so as to negate them. They do not fit into its mould. And the gap of one word does not feel like the gap of another, all empty of content as both might seem necessarily to be when described as gaps. When I vainly try and recall the name of Spalding, my consciousness is far removed from what it is when I vainly try and recall the name of Bowles. There are innumerable consciousnesses of emptiness, no one of which taken in itself has a name, but all different from each other. The ordinary way is to assume that they are all emptinesses of consciousness, and so the same state. But the feeling of an absence is *toto coelo* other than the absence of a feeling. It is an intense feeling. The rhythm of a lost word may be there without a sound to clothe it; or the evanescent sense of something which is the initial vowel or consonant may mock us fitfully, without growing more distinct. Every one must know the tantalizing effect of the blank rhythm of some forgotten verse, restlessly dancing in one's mind, striving to be filled out with words.⁹

When James refers to the search for a 'forgotten name', a name that is now marked by a gap, he indicates that this gap is in one sense acting as an ellipsis, since it signals the omission of the name. However, as James explains, it is not simply a 'mere gap'. It is also an 'intensely active' presence. It acts, therefore, both as an ellipsis, signalling an omission, and also as a 'singular gap', itself a physical presence, containing within it a 'sort of wraith of a name'.

⁶ 'Lecture on nothing', cited in C. B. McCully, p. 61.

⁷ 'Stitches', trans. by Stryk, *Where we are*, p. 159.

⁸ See Thomas's use of James's work in *The Country*, pp. 25-7.

⁹ *The Principles of Psychology* (London: Macmillan, 1890; repr. Chicago: University of Chicago, 1952), p. 163. Originally published in 1890.

The context of this passage in *The Principles of Psychology* is a discussion of the 'feelings of tendency' or the 'sense of the direction from which an impression is about to come, although no positive impression is yet there' that is experienced during the tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon.¹⁰ However, this description can also be applied to instances in composing, when a writer replaces ellipses with words during the drafting process.¹¹ The ease with which James's passage on the tip-of-the tongue phenomenon can be interpreted as an account of the processes of composing suggests that there is a close relation between aspects of creative composing and other forms of expression. The main difference between James's description of the tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon and the process of poetic composition is that, in the case of a poem, the search is not for words that are 'forgotten', but for words that are not yet known.

The detail of this search becomes clearer when examining *The Drier The Brighter* documentation. When I was working on continuing the phrase 'the tram ran him over' in the drafting of the poem 'Building', I did not know the word that was needed. I found it by responding to the pattern of expectations that had already been set up in the draft. This pattern assisted me in finding the word needed to fit the gap by giving me information as to its rhyme, lexical position and length. A similar process occurs in Thomas's work on the 'April / July / The Glory' draft when he rearranges the lines of that draft into three separate poems. The position and length of the gaps in the draft provide the information needed to replace them with words. James describes such gaps as 'singular', distinguished by 'the rhythm of a lost word' or 'the evanescent sense of something which is the initial vowel or consonant' that is 'striving to be filled out with words'.

James concludes his passage on the tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon by emphasising that the 'singular', 'intensely active' gap comprises a definite vagueness. He writes: 'It is, in short, the re-instatement of the vague to its proper place in our mental life which I am so anxious to press on the attention.'¹² Thus, James links this estimation of vagueness as a definite experience, a key doctrine in his theory of psychology, directly to the perception of sensation. For him, 'pure sensation is the

¹⁰ James, *Principles*, p. 165, p. 163.

¹¹ Here, the borderline between ellipses and gaps is blurred. The space is an ellipsis signalling that something is omitted, but it is also a gap framed by the surrounding words that help provide the information needed to fill the gap in.

¹² James, *Principles*, p. 165.

vague', and so vagueness is not a signal of something missing, as in ellipses, but of something almost tangibly present and distinct.¹³

When a poet is working on ellipses, or gaps, in a developing poem, gaps that possess a definite vagueness are of significance. At times, certain gaps may appear so definite and so 'intensely active' that a writer may decide to leave them unfilled, as gaps. Examples of such gaps in *The Drier The Brighter* include the blank whiteness surrounding the word 'Antarctica' in 'Lateral Moraine', and the empty 'womb' of 'Fraught', with the blank space at the physical centre of the poem visually matching its content, and with the speaker physically and linguistically represented as 'flailing', a word that is placed, unsupported by other text, in the middle of that central blank space. The triangular blank middle seam of the palindromic 'On I Tow' provides another example. Its effect on Martin Randall is so intense that he records:

This faintly obsessed me for a while. I kept returning to it. Speaking it aloud, turning the words round and back again. Also, I did start staring into the triangular/pyramidal space between, the gap, the absence. I thought of them as gradients of words, of letters.

Philip Gross, too, notes how the blank space in the poem 'clarifies it funnily and wonderfully: it totally transforms the order in which the words are read, so the reader will always read the right-hand half first, then check out the mirrored image.'¹⁴

James's conception of vagueness as a definite quality can be seen in the drafting process of *The Drier The Brighter* poem 'One Minute's'. As recorded in Chapter Two, in successive drafts of 'One Minute's', vagueness is intensified rather than removed. The confused ending of the first draft, 'undisturbed / by tears', is amended to the more oblique 'unblurred / undisturbed' and then to 'un-// blurred/disturbed'.¹⁵ By removing the defining word 'tears' and by making one negative prefix, 'un-', serve both words, the vagueness of the first draft is increased to

¹³ See G. E. Myers, *William James: his life and thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 82, pp. 505-6, fn. 2; also, unpublished notes to James's *Principles*, cited in Myers, p. 505, fn. 2. Myers writes: 'This note bears no date but has been placed, perhaps by Perry, in folder # 4465, alongside notes for 'The Sentiment of Rationality'. Since that article originally appeared in 1879, this note may indicate that this key doctrine in Jamesian psychology was formulated before *Principles*. James consistently held that perception and distinct sensation "bloom" out of a "buzzing confusion" or conglomeration of vague sensations.'

¹⁴ Randall, Email Responses, 23 May 2005; also, Gross, 12 December 2003. For the final versions of these three poems, see *Brighter*, p. 230, p. 253, p. 244.

¹⁵ Kendall, Records, drafts of 'One Minute's', filed under '11^11', 11 November 2002 and 18 December 2002. For final version see *Brighter*, p. 233.

such an extent that the initial elliptical reference to grief is now so unclear that it becomes almost aporetic.

By the final version of the poem, the gaps created in the text have been multiplied and intensified by the introduction of shifts in perspective, location, style of font, space and positioning of text. The result is not a concomitant increase in confusion, but, on the contrary, a sharpening of the outlines in which the vagueness of the initial draft resided, transforming confusion into a definite vagueness that is expressed by a series of what James would call 'singular gaps'. These gaps make up a substantial part of the final poem.¹⁶ It is not possible to interpret these gaps in this final version as representing particular words or ideas, but they still carry an unmistakable and specific charge, as indicated in Philip Gross's comment, quoted earlier, that 'the very ending alludes to emotion, somewhere', and in Galya Makarova's later observation that 'there's [a] nearly tangible feeling of time in it'.¹⁷ A similar intensification of vagueness can be observed in the incremental increase in shifting line endings and eradication of word boundaries in successive drafts and versions of *The Drier The Brighter* poem 'how your whole life', as discussed in Chapter Two. The intensification, in both poems, results in a sharper stronger effect.

Thomas also intensifies vagueness in order to sharpen effect. His *Matryoshka*-like asides, for example, might appear to hold only tentative marginal positions in the text. However, often these asides refer to each other. This mutual validation of their importance in the work results in a sense of complex rootedness. As a result, despite their apparent marginality, these asides remain firmly present in the work.

In *The South Country*, Thomas echoes James in his description of vagueness as a definite experience. In the early pages of this book, Thomas employs architectural imagery as a metaphor for language (SC, 4-5). In a later chapter, he makes use of this metaphor again, writing of the early annals of the history of England, as quoted in Chapter One of this thesis, that they 'will begin with a geological picture, something large, clear, architectural, not a mass of insignificant names' (SC, 147). In this sentence, Thomas differentiates between two forms of vagueness that could be said to relate to, on the one hand, the confusion that Gross identifies in the early draft of 'One Minute's', and, on the other, the sharper outline of the completed poem. Thomas describes these two forms of vagueness as an indiscriminate 'mass' of plural 'names'

¹⁶ See *Brighter*, p. 233.

¹⁷ Gross, Email Responses, 14 December 2002; also, Makarova, 17 February 2005.

and as the sharp definition of an architectural 'clear' 'geological picture' in which vagueness, although still an indefinite 'something', is specific, contained and defined by a perceptibly tangible 'large, clear' outline. The shaped or framed 'architectural' space of this 'something' renders it a 'singular gap', both empty and particular in an outline that has no apparent content. The implication of a concrete physical structure that the term 'architectural' evokes is apt in this search for corporeal or concrete records of what pre-dates or exists at the limits of linguistic records.

In Thomas's view, such definite vagueness allows the writer to discern what lies on or beyond the margins of words. As noted in Chapter One, Woolf also refers to the experience of discerning a similar vague and yet definite 'something' in her review of Thomas's *A Literary Pilgrim*. Her description of Hardy and Brontë's work is worth repeating here. She writes that

through the half-shut eyes with which we visualize books as a whole, we can see great tracts of Wessex and of the Yorkshire Moors inhabited by a race of people who seem to have the rough large outline of the land itself. It is not with either of these writers a case of the word-painter's gift; for though they may have their detachable descriptions, the element we mean is rubbed deep into the texture and moulds every part.¹⁸

Woolf suggests that clarification of what is perceived can be achieved by an increase in the vagueness of that perception, achieved by half-shutting the eyes. In addition, like Thomas and James, she emphasises that, although the content of such vagueness may be elusive, other attributes, such as its size, outline or frame, announce its presence.

Like James, Sigmund Freud also writes of gaps as specific entities. His work in this area provides a helpful reference point when investigating Thomas's understanding of the composing process, since Freud draws explicit connections between the activity of dreaming and the process of composing. In 'Creative Writers and Day-dreaming', he compares 'poetical creation with the day-dream', and indicates that the process of composing a creative piece operates according to similar principles as those that shape dream images.¹⁹ The writings and theories of Freud were current in

¹⁸ *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 October 1917, p. 489.

¹⁹ 'Creative Writers and Day-dreaming', in *Art and Literature*, trans. by James Strachey, 15 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1990 – 1993), XIV (1990), 131-141 (p.139, p. 136). This essay was first published in German in 1908. See also Freud's reference to the fact 'that invented dreams can be interpreted in the same way as real ones and that the unconscious mechanisms familiar to us in the "dream-work" are thus also operative in the processes of imaginative writing.' Freud, 'An Autobiographical Study', in *Historical and Expository Works on Psychoanalysis*, trans. by James

literary circles during Thomas's lifetime, particularly in the works of D. H. Lawrence, whom Thomas admired, telling Bottomley, for example, that he hoped Bottomley had not 'become too classic to like Lawrence'.²⁰ Freud's writings were also directly accessible to Thomas, since Thomas had good German and Freud's work was in any case translated into English in Thomas's lifetime. In addition, Thomas would have encountered Freud's theories during his treatment in 1912 and 1913 by Godwin Baynes, a nervous disorder specialist who later became the champion and translator of Carl Jung.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud explicitly recognises that there are gaps which should remain as gaps, unfilled, like the spaces purposively left empty in *The Drier The Brighter* poem 'On I Tow'. Freud notes how 'our memory reproduces the dream not only incompletely but also untruthfully, in a falsifying manner', and queries 'whether in our attempted reproduction we have not filled in the gaps which really existed'. He goes on to explain the crucial role that such gaps can play in dream-work, observing that 'gaps in the dreams are often of the nature of boundary-zones' between different significant areas of the dream.²¹ In Freud's reading, therefore, such gaps are not only 'singular' and 'intensely active', as James viewed them, but they also affect the fragments that make up the dream. They mark the limits of those fragments and, to a degree, also extend those limits. Once again, this relates to the active part gaps can play in the drafting process and in shaping the text of the completed poem, as occurs in the drafting and final spaced presentation of *The Drier The Brighter* poem 'One Minute's' and in the creation of spaces by means of the unusual line-breaks in 'how your whole life'. In both these cases, the spaces in the poems have a major role to play in the final effect.

Thomas also makes use of physical gaps in his creative pieces. However, the effects in his published work are muted. More striking examples occur in the peculiar gap-ridden orthography of his handwritten letters and also in his signature. These provide a clear visual representation of the way spaces can be used to mark the limits of what is actually written and of how spaces can also be used to extend a piece beyond those limits. In Thomas's handwritten orthography, groups of words are often

Strachey, 15 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990 – 1993), xv (1993), 183-259 (p. 250). First published in German in 1925.

²⁰ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 225 (November 1912), see also p. 10. Thomas favourably reviewed D. H. Lawrence's *Love Poems and Others* in *Daily Chronicle*, February 1913. He also called it 'the book of the moment' in 'More Georgian Poetry', *Bookman*, 44 (April 1913), 47.

²¹ *Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. by Brill, p. 356, p. 400.

bunched together or separated by gaps in ways that do not correspond to grammatical groupings. Frequently, the punctuation marks of fullstops or commas are preceded and followed by significant gaps , like these .²² Thomas never refers to this use of spacing directly, and his editor, R. G. Thomas, abandons an attempt to interpret them, noting: 'I have tried to discover a fixed principle behind this habit and failed to do so' (*CP*, xxxi). However, R. G. Thomas does refer to their contribution to the rhythm of the text in which they lie. He sees them as 'almost a kind of guide to the way in which a passage or a sentence could be read. (Spacing played a key part in the notation of sol-fa which Thomas used in transcribing songs.)' (*CP*, xxxi, fn. 32). This reading by R. G. Thomas resonates with Charles Olson's 'post-modernist' interpretation of e. e. cummings's use of spaces in the 1950s. Olson writes that these spaces represent 'that time to pass that it takes the eye – that hair of time suspended – to pick up the next line'.²³

There are differences, however, between Olson's correlation of space with the breath and performance of the poet, and Thomas's more approximate use of space as rougher indications of rhythm, speed, content, emotion and atmosphere in his pieces. These differences can be related in part to the technical media used. Thomas's employment of spacing in his writing is mainly restricted to his handwritten letters. He rarely resorts to it in the more exactly spaced lettering of his typed manuscripts. As R. G. Thomas notes, 'Thomas himself substituted ordinary punctuation practice when he came to type his own poems and, in the poems that he passed for printing, there is no attempt to deviate from common practice'.²⁴ For Olson, on the other hand, it was the advent of the mechanical typewriter which afforded him the opportunity to exploit spacing in the way he wished. In his view, the exactness and specificity of the spaces that the typewriter produces made it possible to incorporate the body, voice and performance of the poet in the spaces of the printed poem.

The further experimentation with space that occurs in twenty-first century digital poetry, and the strong emphasis on process in that art form, are also clearly related to the qualities present in the interactive media used. The further definition and detail afforded by these media allow for greater emphasis on process, whether in the temporal and spatial context of performance or in the possibility of an interactive

²² For examples of Thomas's handwriting, see Appendix G.1 and 2; also, Chapter One, Appendix C.2.

²³ *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, ed. by Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 22-3.

²⁴ *CP*, introduction, p. xxxi.

relationship with a reader. The complex multi-dimensional qualities offered by the combined use of media in digital poetry contribute to the complex effect attainable by the completed piece.²⁵

In his letters Thomas exploits the physical gaps between handwritten words in order to add to the overall effect of the letters. In the following approximation, in print, of the spacing used in a handwritten note that Thomas sent to de la Mare, the words act as frames for the spaces that juxtapose them. Thomas writes:

if possible stay one night , since
a day with a long uncomfortable
railway journey at each end is nothing
at all but an interval.²⁶

Like the sky in *Beautiful Wales*, the gaps are pushed from the background into the foreground, becoming part of the content of the note. The word 'long' is framed by two spaces on either side, but, equally, 'long' and 'uncomfortable' also frame a space. In a similar fashion, the comma in 'if possible stay one night , since' acts as a marker of a pause in the text, but also ends a previous pause marked by the space between the word 'night' and the comma in 'night ,'. This space after the word 'night' becomes part of the phrase 'stay one night', which reads as 'stay one night'. Similarly, the space that is placed after the comma becomes the opening section of the following phrase, which reads not as 'since a day' but as ' since a day'. In addition, the gaps in this text directly reflect its content, since they visually and rhythmically represent the 'interval' visit that de la Mare was proposing, and also evoke the discomfort of such a short visit.

: as a 'sob-filled pause'

What was hard to understand - the holes
in everything, the held wings broken.²⁷

Gillian Allnutt

In his prose book, *In Pursuit of Spring*, Thomas refers to the note-taking of an imaginary writer, whose writing habits clearly bear some resemblance to those of Thomas himself. He writes:

²⁵ See *Flash Art Gallery*, www.shu.ac.uk/schools/cs/teaching/sle/earnshaw/gallery/.

²⁶ Bodleian, MS Eng lett c 376, Letters to Walter de la Mare, folio 8 (10 March 1907). See Appendix G.2 for the handwritten letter. Author's spacing.

²⁷ *Sojourner* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2004), p. 54.

He said that they [notebooks] blinded him to nearly everything that would not go into the form of notes; or, at any rate, he could never afterwards reproduce the great effects of Nature and fill in the interstices merely – which was all they were good for – from the notes. The notes – often of things which he would otherwise have forgotten – had to fill the whole canvas. Whereas, if he had taken none, then only the important, what he truly cared for, would have survived in his memory, arranged not perhaps as they were in Nature, but at least according to the tenderness of his own spirit.²⁸

Thomas's reference to the purpose of notes as being to 'fill in the interstices merely' rather than 'to fill the whole canvas', as if they are acting as patches on only parts of the canvas, suggests that in the composing process also notes should act like physical patches. This image of patching is one that Thomas often resorts to when discussing the process of writing. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud makes a similar reference to the act of patching when composing. In Freud's case, he is referring to the composition not of a piece of writing but of a dream. When Freud describes the function of secondary revision in dream-work, he writes that 'with its rags and tatters it stops up the breaches in the structure of the dream'.²⁹ Initial fragments of a dream may revolve round painful emotional material, but the act of patching that occurs in secondary revision represses this material. Thomas, too, suggests, in a passage from *In Pursuit of Spring*, that misuse of notes obstructs access to what the writer 'truly' cares for. So both Thomas and Freud are saying that patching can obscure emotional content, and implying, therefore, that the gaps being patched contain emotion.

Thomas makes this point more unequivocally in the piece 'An Unpublished Author', where he discusses the difference between handwriting and print. He writes of the unidentified 'unpublished author' of the title of this piece, a figure who bears some relation to himself, as follows:

It is true that his was a calligraphy as terrible as ever beatific printer changed into decent type; but is the printer indeed beatific. 'Did you,' writes he himself, 'ever consider how much of *l'homme même* goes into an author's handwriting, how much is abstracted by that plaguey modernism – printing? Take, for example, the wine-bibber who sits down to write verses. Splendid visions he has; chance words of his are divine; but on the chill day following how little that is divine and bacchic remains, if the memorial scrawl is lost and only a *fair* copy lives. It would scarce be worse if a painter bade his lackey put in such or such a line.'³⁰

²⁸ Edward Thomas, *In Pursuit of Spring* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1914), p. 220.

²⁹ *Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. by Brill, p. 338. Strachey translates this as: 'it fills up the gaps in the dream-structure with shreds and patches', p. 630 (Strachey translation).

³⁰ 'An Unpublished Author', *Atlantic Monthly*, 90 (1902), 834-838 (p. 835).

Thomas's reference to the loss of emotional import in the even spacing of print implies that emotion is expressed by the irregular spacing of a handwritten text. This is confirmed in *Jefferies*, when Thomas describes Jefferies's 'irregular, patchwork essays' as having 'a structure made at least as much by the emotions as by the intellect'.³¹ The adjective 'irregular' as a description of Jefferies's work suggests a rough patchwork in which spaces are still evident, and contrasts with Thomas's later references in *Pater* to Pater's closely written prose as being stacked with words 'like bricks' that have little or no space between them, refusing 'to fall into the rhythms which only emotion can command'.³²

In Thomas's own work, the emotional import of uneven spacing is most evident in his use of lists. Commonly, when referring to his burdensome workload as a reviewer in his letters, Thomas heaps titles on top of each other as if to form a pile of books precariously balanced on a desk on the verge of collapse:

Thank you for your poem. Let me have time. I may not be able to open it for a week, because I have to review

Thomas More by Stephen Gwyn
The Grey Brethren by Michael Fairless
William Bodham Donne & his friends
Peeps into Nature's Ways
A Country Diary
Travels round our Village
A folio Chaucer
A new Keats

Also to correct proofs, sow beans, peas, brussels sprouts, leeks, radishes . . . and walk much with a visitor this weekend.³³

In the above letter, Thomas places a vertical list of the books he has to review over a horizontal list of other tasks in waiting. The horizontal list apparently ends in a three-point ellipsis, but then continues, as does the sentence, with a reference to a planned walk with a visitor. The repeated commas of the horizontal list have an effect similar to that produced by the space that divides each item in the vertical list. Each comma singles out individual words or groups of words, such as 'beans, peas, brussels sprouts', physically separating them from their neighbours. Nevertheless, as the decision to head this list of vegetables with the vegetable-like occupation of proof-correction indicates, the order of the items on this list, and, therefore, the connections

³¹ *Jefferies*, p. 290.

³² *Pater*, p. 218.

³³ *Letters to Bottomley*, pp. 81-2 (16 March 1905).

between each item, have been carefully considered. This mirrors the care with which the items on the vertical list have been positioned on the page so as to resemble a top-heavy pile of books. In addition, the ellipses in the horizontal list reiterate the endlessness of the commissioned tasks, an impression reinforced by the addition of yet another item after the ellipsis. The gap marked by the ellipsis that apparently concludes and acts as a frame for the list, 'leeks, radishes ...', is then itself inverted into a gap that is framed by the radishes on one side and the planned walk on the other, 'radishes ... and walk much'. The result verges on the melodramatic.

A more poignant example of space filled with emotion occurs in one of the last letters Thomas sent to his wife from the Front. He writes:

But it

was dirty & tiring , for I had on
 vest
 shirt
 2 waistcoats
 tunic
 one Tommy's buttoned waistcoat
 British warm
 & waterproofs
 Only 2 or 3 shells came over & I found
 the telephonists dozing & here in a dry
 corner we dozed or smoked till daybreak ³⁴

This letter, like others Thomas sent from the Front, was written in a crowded and close hand, presumably in order to save the scarce commodity of paper. The physical difficulties of his situation are also emphasised by the use of a vertical list with its visual depiction of layers of bulky clothing, its relatively generous spacing made all the more striking in the context of the need to save paper. The spaces that surround the list, and that are interspersed within it, appear not only as a subtle acknowledgement of the presence of military censorship, which also formed part of Thomas's military duties, but also as an indication of his self-imposed restrictions on emotional expression. He alludes to these restrictions in a second note to his wife a few days later: 'I, you see, must not feel anything. I am just as it were tunnelling underground and something sensible in my subconsciousness directs me not to think of the sun.'³⁵ He cannot speak directly. Instead, the spaces speak for him.

³⁴ Thomas to Helen Thomas, NLW, Letters: Edward Thomas to Helen, 1916-17, MS 22917C, folio 159 (letter dated 31 March 1917, with a later section written on 1 April). R. G. Thomas marks this list with vertical lines and reads 'leather' for 'buttoned', 'there in a clay' for 'here in a dry' and 'dozed and smoked' for 'dozed or smoked' in *Selected Letters*, p. 159.

³⁵ *Selected Letters*, p. 163 ([6 April] 1917).

Turning to *The Drier The Brighter* documentation, in terms of direct use of spaced punctuation, two poems in particular immediately stand out. These are ‘unfamiliar’ and ‘lost’.³⁶ The use of spaced punctuation in these poems came about partly as a result of studying Thomas’s handwriting. However, as noted in the introduction to this thesis, I only became aware of this similarity in use of spaced punctuation after I had started experimenting with it. This suggests that the influence from Thomas was not the only trigger. At the time of drafting ‘unfamiliar’, for example, I observed the link between space and emotion in the poem, and recorded, before I recognised the similarity with Thomas’s orthography, that ‘when I try reading it the lines that start with a gap have a silent sort of sob-filled pause that starts them – and the last, wordless, line has a wordless but equalling a word space of emotion, inarticulate.’ I also observed at this time that this gap referred to ‘sadness/vulnerability when speaking about refraining from love because in fact [the speaker of the poem] hasn’t refrained’.³⁷ So, irrespective of the influence from Thomas, the spaces in the poem appear connected to its emotional charge.

: as shreds and patches

A wandering minstrel I—
 A thing of shreds and patches,
 Of ballads, songs and snatches,
 And dreamy lullaby!³⁸

W. S. Gilbert

In the following self-referential passage in a letter to Bottomley, Thomas deliberately sculpts out a vertical list. Paradoxically, this list, shaped by gaps, is Thomas’s response to inappropriate gaps in one of his commissioned works which he filled with sculpted patches, as revealed in his request to Hudson for passages of a specific length: ‘will you give me leave to use, if necessary, one or two short passages – never more than 200 words – from your books to fill up a page or two of the book which would otherwise be blank?’³⁹ In the letter to Bottomley, Thomas writes:

The fact is I dislike the book; so I ran dry at once - had to steal from old articles & patch them up - & even then could not cover the space which

³⁶ See *Brighter*, p. 266, p. 227. Other poems in *Brighter* that can also be said to make use of spaced punctuation are ‘-wards’ and ‘patched work’, p. 228, p. 229.

³⁷ Records, filed under ‘angel cake’, 15 May 2004.

³⁸ ‘*The Mikado; or The Town of Titipu*’, in *Original Comic Operas* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1899), p. 4 (Act 1).

³⁹ Thomas to W. H. Hudson, *Edward Thomas Fellowship Newsletter*, 52 (August 2004), 6 (12 January 1907).

finally
I covered
with the help of
a sonnet by De la Mare
and
a long sentence of prose by W. H. Hudson.⁴⁰

In this description of his attempts to cover apparently unwanted or inappropriate gaps in his work, Thomas resorts to patchwork imagery, as if to echo Freud's reference to the activity of patching up gaps that 'really existed' in dream-work. In tandem with his description of his method in the letter, Thomas also lays out the lines so that the words he uses both refer to the act of patching and act as patches. However, the unevenness of the lines in which these 'word-patches' are presented makes it clear that they not only cover gaps but also create them. They are ill-fitting and, just as in the book to which the letter refers, plainly do 'not cover the space' of the page. As a result, the positioning of these phrases on the page has the result of turning them into graphic illustrations of their own purpose, deliberately rough, the space showing beneath and between them, like Jefferies' 'irregular, patchwork essays' and like the page in *The Book of the Open Air* to which they refer.⁴¹ The implication is that Thomas 'could not cover the space' not merely because he had a shortage of material and 'ran dry' but because those gaps do in fact 'really exist', whether patched over or not, and so cannot be filled in. Any words used to cover them will in fact also highlight their existence.

Such gaps also exist in Thomas's published work. This is particularly evident in his prose books because of his tendency to write pieces the length of an essay or paragraph rather than of full book-length. He comments on this tendency as follows:

Positively only reviews & nature ever make me think at all & that in a way beyond my control - things occur to me & I think for about the length of a lyric & then down & blank & something new - if the old idea returns it will not grow, but is only repeated.⁴²

⁴⁰ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 133 (7 March 1907). In the letter, R. G. Thomas replicates what he considers to be significant spaces in Thomas's handwritten orthography. It refers to an introduction Thomas has to write to a book he also edited, *The Book of the Open Air*, 1, v.

⁴¹ Thomas, *Jefferies*, p. 290. See Appendix H for the relevant page in *The Book of the Open Air*.

⁴² *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 140 (14 May 1907); see also R. G. Thomas's note: 'A constant theme of ET and a key to both his poetry and his best prose: cf. G. Saintsbury, *The Later Nineteenth Century*, reviewed *Daily Chronicle*, 29 October; H. Belloc, *The Historic Thames*, *Daily Chronicle*, 18 June; and, more obliquely, A. G. Bradley, *Round about Wiltshire*, *Daily Chronicle*, 6 June' (*Letters to Bottomley*, p. 140, fn. 2).

His prose books are formed by the 'piling-up of landscapes', short sketches and series of short prose poems.⁴³ In between these 'landscapes' are gaps linking and dividing them, and so marking the transitions between different significant areas in a way that evokes Freud's 'boundary-zones' of dreams.⁴⁴ These gaps are both covered and highlighted by patches of words that take the form, as in Thomas's letters and his edition of *The Book of the Open Air*, of obvious quotations or long lists.

Thomas partly blames publishers' demands for the patchwork effect of his prose. In a letter to Bottomley, he refers to old essays he added to his book *The Heart of England* as follows: 'Dent insisted on 6,000 [words] - & so I had to throw them in. They make a nasty mess.'⁴⁵ However, Thomas's wry and sometimes melodramatically denigratory pronouncements on his prose are not necessarily intended to be taken seriously.⁴⁶ This is confirmed by the way he appears to court gaps even when apparently involved in the act of patching them. His extremely long lists themselves produce further gaps. When he uses vertical lists, the spaces are created by the uneven lengths of the lines. When he uses long horizontal lists, a metaphorical space is created by the major interruption of the main text that such a list necessarily effects.

For Thomas, his lists seem to take on the status of poetry. Firstly, they are mostly made up of place-names, which he sees as having 'a wealth of poetry in them' (*SC*, 4), calling them 'poems' (*SC*, 148). Secondly, he treats his lists as if they were actual quotations from a poem. This is clearly shown in his presentation of a vertical list of wood names in *The South Country*, in which he reproduces 'notices fixed to the doors of barn and shed, with the names of the copses and woods' visually on the page:

At Penshurst lately, for example, I saw these names:

Black Hoath Wood.
Heronry Pond.
Marlpit Field.
Tapner's Wood.
Ashour Farm.
Sidney's Coppice.
Weir Field.
Well Place.

⁴³ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 120 (4 September 1906). For further details on this, see R. G. Thomas, *Portrait*, p. 160, p. 200. Also, Bottomley, 'A Note on Edward Thomas', *Welsh Review*, 4.3 (September 1945), 166-177 (p. 171). See also Lucy Newlyn's introduction to Thomas, *Oxford*, pp. xlvi-xlvi.

⁴⁴ *Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. by Brill, p. 400.

⁴⁵ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 118 (27 August 1906). The reference is to Thomas's *Heart of England*.

⁴⁶ See, for example, *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 105, fn. 1 and p. 147, fn. 4.

I was back in Sidney's time, remembering that genial poem of Ben Jonson's, 'To Penhurst,' and especially the lines:

Thy copse too, named of Gamage, thou hast there,
That never fails to serve thee season'd deer,
When thou wouldst feed or exercise thy friends.
The lower land, that to the river bends,
Thy sheep, thy bullocks, kine, and calves do feed;
The middle grounds thy mares and horses breed.
Each bank doth yield thee conies; and the tops
Fertile of wood, Ashore and Sidney's coppes.
To crown thy open table, doth provide
The purple pheasant with the speckled side, ... (SC, 202)⁴⁷

The result of this arrangement on the page is that the space created by the vertical list gives it the shape of a poem. This impression is emphasised by the almost immediate quotation from Jonson's 'To Penhurst'. This quotation is then followed by a second separate quotation of eighteen lines from the same poem. These quotations, like the wood name list, also serve as meditations on the name and place of Penhurst and its woods. Their judicious placing next to the wood name list further reinforces the status of that list as poetry.

In Thomas's later poems, another use of space occurs. His abbreviated poem titles seem to trail off into blankness. To take just one example, so little is given away in 'When first' that, as has already been noted in Chapter Two, it verges upon aporia even before the body of the poem, the attempt at articulation, has begun. It is as if the absence Thomas wishes to express in the content of 'When first' in the memory of what is gone and the attachment to it, as in the lines 'louder the heart's dance / At parting than at meeting be', is heralded by an absence of words in the poem's title (CP, 345). Such unorthodox use of space resonates with the more dramatic experiments of Thomas's Modernist contemporaries, as well as chiming in with Japanese use of absence in, as Noguchi phrases it, 'the art how to leave unsung'.⁴⁸

A more subtle integration of gaps in creative work is seen in Thomas's poem 'The sun used to shine'. A number of the printed stanzas in this poem start on a negative note, but then build up by their last line to a more positive ending. This, however, is followed by another negative beginning in the next printed stanza. The leaps in tone between the stanzas are highlighted by the fact that they are also linked by enjambment. Stanza one, for example, ends on a light tone, with the words

⁴⁷ The indentations used in this quotation replicate those employed in the book.

⁴⁸ For further discussion of this point, see Clive Wilmer, 'Edward Thomas: Englishness and Modernity', *PN Review* 138, 24.4 (2001), 59-64; Noguchi, *English Writings*, II, 130.

'cheerfully parted', but the next stanza continues the sentence with an introduction of darkness in the words 'each night'. Stanza two ends with 'poetry', but stanza three adds 'to rumours of war'. Stanza four ends with 'birth'. Stanza five places this birth 'in sunless Hades fields' (*CP*, 319). Despite the enjambments from one stanza to the next, these shifts in tone suggest that something is at work in the space that divides the stanzas from each other. In other words, the gaps between the stanzas act as invisible counterparts to the worded text, shifting the tone back from a positive to a negative note, as if acting as a mirror image of their printed neighbours. Thus, the gaps become as important a part of the structure of the poem as the printed words, and the physical area that the poem covers on the page is, therefore, larger than the area covered by the printed text. Like the space that precedes the punctuation in Thomas's handwritten orthography, the area outside the printed text in 'The sun used to shine' both frames the printed stanzas and is framed by them. The poem is, therefore, able to include what cannot be expressed in words, as well as what is expressed. In this way, the gap as 'an unfilled space or interval' becomes as much part of the work as the filled space, with the result that the written text approaches the condition of the haiku as described by Noguchi: 'a tiny star carrying the whole large sky at its back.'⁴⁹

Unfinishedness

How pleasant -
just once *not* to see
Fuji through mist.⁵⁰

Matsuo Bashō

pictures of perfection as you know make me sick and wicked⁵¹

Jane Austen

In the 1802 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth refers to an aesthetic of unfinishedness. He writes, as noted earlier, in terms of the artist as translator and the work of art as translation of a more 'finished' original. The passage in which he says this reads:

⁴⁹ *OED*, IV (1961), 48; *English Writings*, II, 69.

⁵⁰ *On Love and Barley: Haiku of Bashō*, trans. by Lucian Stryk, p. 73. Translator's emphasis.

⁵¹ Austen to Fanny Knight, in Jane Austen, *Jane Austen's Letters to her sister Cassandra and others*, ed. by Robert William Chapman, 2nd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1952; 2nd repr. 1964), 23 March 1817, pp. 141-2.

[A poet] should consider himself as in the situation of a translator, who deems himself justified when he substitutes excellencies of another kind for those which are unattainable by him; and endeavours occasionally to surpass his original, in order to make some amends for the general inferiority to which he feels he must submit.⁵²

John Ruskin echoes this Romantic doctrine in *The Stones of Venice*, in which he, like Thomas, uses architecture as a starting-point to discuss the process of composition in sculpture in relation to other art forms. Ruskin notes that ‘no great man ever stops working until he has reached his point of failure; that is to say, his mind is always far in advance of his powers of execution’, and that ‘no good work whatever can be perfect, and *the demand for perfection is always a sign of a misunderstanding of the ends of art.*’⁵³ Thomas named one of the chapters of his *Oxford*, ‘Stones of Oxford’, after Ruskin’s ‘The Stones of Venice’. Also, as has been shown earlier, Thomas shares Wordsworth’s view of the artist as translator and the work of art as translation. In a letter to his friend, Jesse Berridge, Thomas makes a direct reference to an aesthetic of unfinishedness. He writes, with regard to his completed poems, as follows:

Send the verses back when you have done with them. I fancy they are sufficiently new in their way to be unacceptable if the reader gets caught up by their way & doesn’t get any effect before he begins to consider & see their ‘unfinished’.⁵⁴

Thomas also relates the aesthetic of unfinishedness to oral literature, as is suggested in his reference in a review, quoted in Chapter One, to ‘what poetry was before Keats and Tennyson had so adorned it that it could run and sing too seldom, when words were, and more often than they now are, dissolved and hidden in the beauty which they created’.⁵⁵ In addition, unfinishedness is an essential element in Japanese aesthetics. This is indicated in many references in Kenkō’s *Miscellany of a Japanese Priest*. The following statement by Kenkō also relates the process of composing to architecture: ‘There are some who say that when a palace is being built, you should never fail to leave one little piece of it uncompleted.’⁵⁶

⁵² *Lyrical Ballads*, preface of 1802, p. 251.

⁵³ *The Stones of Venice*, in *The Works of John Ruskin: Library Edition*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 38 vols (London: George Allen, 1903 – 1912), x, Part 2 (1904), p. 202. Author’s emphasis.

⁵⁴ *Jesse Berridge*, p. 78 (1 June 1915).

⁵⁵ ‘*Eve and other Poems* by Ralph Hodgson’, *Poetry and Drama*, 13 (September 1913), 370-71 (p. 371).

⁵⁶ Kenkō, p. 67 (Section 82).

Thomas's use of architectural imagery not only surfaces in his discussions on language, as in, for example, the passages quoted earlier from *The South Country*. He has also commented on his own tendency to write about houses, which he often uses as images of self-expression, writing to Bottomley in 1909 that 'so far the best things I have done have been about houses. I have quite a long series – I discover, tho I did not design it.'⁵⁷ Typically, too, as noted earlier, he chooses to entitle three poems as 'Home' or "'Home'", and also uses 'Home' as the title for a prose piece. In addition, a number of his other poems include 'house' in the title. The frequency with which building and architectural imagery is used to describe the process of composing in Thomas's work, and in the work of other writers, indicates the importance to the artist of a sense of design in the work, whether realised by that artist at the time of composition or not.⁵⁸ Even an unfinished work needs to have a structure in order for that structure not to be completed. Imagery of building and architecture also relates to the concept of a work as a habitation or as a space to be inhabited. It reflects, too, the role of absence in the process of composing, and in the completed work, as a physical and inhabiting presence.

beyond finishedness

it is better to leave a little imperfection⁵⁹
Kenkō

The adoption by an artist of the aesthetic of unfinishedness makes it difficult for that artist to know when to stop working on a creative piece, since the stopping-point will in these cases no longer coincide with an obvious point of finish. This is made clear in Thomas's response to his friend, Edward Garnett. Garnett, a publisher's reader, had suggested that Thomas's poetry was in need of 'chiselling'. Thomas counters that 'it would be the easiest thing in the world to clean it all up & trim it & have every line straightforward in sound & sense, but it would not really improve it'.⁶⁰ The poem must either continue beyond the point that is 'straightforward in sound & sense' or end previous to that point.

⁵⁷ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 194 (12 October 1909).

⁵⁸ At least a quarter of the poems in *Brighter*, for example, contain obvious architectural or building references.

⁵⁹ *The Miscellany of a Japanese Priest*, p. 67 (Section 82).

⁶⁰ *A Selection of Letters to Edward Garnett*, ed. by Edward Garnett (Edinburgh: Tragara Press, 1981), p. 29 (undated letter placed after 21 April 15 and before 19 January 1917).

There are cases where poets are forced to stop before they would wish to, as occurs with the aborted poem in 'Insomnia' and the narrator's failure to 'frame an epitaph' in 'Beauty' (*CP*, 97). However, Ruskin's reference to a great artist's 'point of failure' alludes to an unfinishedness that results not from premature abandonment of a composition, but from continuation beyond the poet's capabilities and beyond a point of control. Such unfinishedness occurs in 'Beauty' when the poet gives up trying to 'frame' or contain his 'epitaph'. At this point, the process of composing continues beyond his frame of reference, resulting in the discovery of 'Beauty', a word that also forms the title of the poem in which this composing takes place. It is implied that the word 'Beauty' in the poem represents the product that poets aim for when writing, a reading that can be applied both to the appearance of 'Beauty' within the poem, and, in fact, to the poem itself, also called 'Beauty', this second reading incorporating a self-reflexive reference by Thomas to his own process of writing. The fact that 'Beauty' is found out of doors reinforces the suggestion that poems are discovered rather than created. The narrator, and, by implication, Thomas as well, finds 'Beauty' when he gives up trying to compose and allows his mind to slip through the enclosing and limiting world in which he has been attempting to compose. This is described in the poem as his heart, or 'some fraction of me', that floats through the frame of the window of the room in which he is sitting. 'Beauty' is then discovered in a half-visible 'misting, dim-lit' vale outside. This suggests that the marginal, not fully seen and not fully in the poet's control, becomes, paradoxically, essential to the poetic experience. The 'misting, dim-lit' vale is unfinished and only half-visible, but the gaps, silences and obscurities that render it unfinished are also integral to it. They act like the 'always silent, but never forgotten, the restless, towering outline of a mountain' in *Beautiful Wales*, and like the pauses in the robin's song in 'Insomnia'.⁶¹

In his description of a robin singing in his novel *The Happy-go-lucky Morgans*, Thomas emphasises the lack of beginning to the song, recording how the bird 'often rehearses the first half of his song in silence and then suddenly continues aloud, as if he were beginning in mid-song'.⁶² The first notes of the song remain lost or unknown. The song is, therefore, not only unfinished but 'unbegun'. Thomas stresses a similar lack of beginnings and endings in the process of composing when describing his experience of writing *The Ickniel Way*. He makes it clear that his

⁶¹ *Beautiful Wales*, p. 42, *The Last Sheaf*, p. 41.

⁶² *The Happy-go-lucky Morgans* (London: Duckworth, 1913), p. 7.

travels along this ancient road form an analogy for the composing process, and notes how, as walker and writer, he 'could not find a beginning or an end' to the road. His discovery of it remains unfinished. The importance to Thomas of the endlessness of such experiences is indicated in his choice of a quotation from Yeats's play *Where There is Nothing* as an epigraph to *The South Country*:

Did you ever think that the roads are the only things that are endless; that one can walk on and on and on, and never be stopped by a gate or a wall? They are the serpent of eternity. I wonder they have never been worshipped. What are the stars beside them? They never meet one another. The roads are the only things that are infinite. They are all endless. (SC, ix)

As Thomas notes in *The Icknield Way*, however, such roads are also without beginnings. It has already been shown how the emphasis that Thomas places on poems located within the environment, in birdsong or in roads that have no beginnings relates to his interest in the lost beginnings of literature, a vanishing oral tradition, and to his interest in the traces of that history, discernible in the marks and swellings of the landscape and in the current vernacular. His appreciation of landmarks as historical records and, in particular, his appreciation of the localised features of the hawthorn and apple tree often recorded in early English history, and of the vernacular as it relates to those landmarks, results, as indicated in Chapter One, in a representation of landmarks and the vernacular as forms of oral literature in themselves. This occurs in Thomas's notes in his essay, 'England', on the hawthorn in Asser's chronicle of the battle of Ashdown, which, he writes, 'tells me of the making of landmarks and the beginning of historic places'.⁶³

Thomas's choice of metaphors when referring to landmarks also implies their status as literature. The landmark is an 'inscription, brief as an epitaph, in many languages and characters' and history is to be found on 'every swelling of the grass' (SC, 150). Marks on the land and records of the human vernacular come together for Thomas in the guise of place-names, which he describes as poems (SC, 148). Once again, unfinishedness is evident, as the history held in both landmarks and place-names continually vanishes from human memory. Knowledge of place-names, for example, is often incomplete. Thomas writes of people he meets who, as he says, 'fearing neither man nor God nor philology', furnish him with imaginary but vivid explanations of local place-names. He notes that 'we have need of men like that to

⁶³ 'England', *The Last Sheaf*, p. 101.

explain “Eggpie” Lane near the village of Sevenoaks Weald, or Tumbling Bay in a neighbouring parish far inland’, and that ‘future antiquaries’ would be misled ‘to form a wild opinion of our standard of scenery from the prevalence of “Belle Vue”’.⁶⁴ Such incomplete records of history are like the robin’s song in ‘Insomnia’ and *The Happy-go-lucky Morgans* and like the ancient Icknield Way. Just as the robin appears to start singing after the song has already begun, and the writer begins describing the road when he is already some way along it, so the historian can only record the more recent activities of history. Thomas argues that earlier records of history, and records of the overlooked or ordinary, are only accessible through the imagination, and so ‘the historian who has not the extensive sympathy and imagination of a great novelist will have no chance of success’ (SC, 147).

Thomas applies these observations of history to oral literature. However, in addition to its unrecorded past, oral literature’s future is also unknown and unpredictable. Its text is not fixed in time. It transforms itself at each retelling, as Thomas points out in his references in his ‘Note on Sources’ in *Celtic Stories* to the Welsh Mabinogion as “twice-told tales” or ‘precisely the old tales on which a young writer practised’, and to Irish tales, which, he says, storytellers retell ‘age after age, adding to them and taking away’.⁶⁵ Oral literature, therefore, also retains a quality of unfinishedness. Not only is the whole bigger than its visible or audible parts, but it has no fixed shape, changing with each retelling.

For Thomas, therefore, the practice of unfinishedness in his own written text becomes a way of evoking earlier forms of literature, in which the process of composing extends beyond individual writers and individual deliveries of a work. One result of this in oral literature is that the writer is made part of the mutable unfinished process. The writer’s role recedes into anonymity as subsequent ‘addings’ and ‘takings away’ occur. At times, Thomas attempts to extend such oral anonymity to written work, as seen, for example, in his decision not to credit Bottomley for his part in arranging Welsh lyrics for *Beautiful Wales*, in his action in slipping his and others’ translations and quotations anonymously into his own work, and in publishing his own poems under a pseudonym. He does not appear, however, to share Harold Bloom’s later ‘anxiety of influence’ when he refers to this indebtedness to the past. He sees it more as a sharing of responsibility for a creative piece.

⁶⁴ Thomas’s introduction to *Words and Places*, cited in *A language*, p. 213, p. 214.

⁶⁵ *Celtic Stories*, pp. 126-7.

In 1929, Woolf addresses this subject more directly in *A Room Of One's Own*. As seen in Chapter One, she writes of the solid effect of such shared responsibility:

Chaucer [could no more have written] without those forgotten poets who paved the ways and tamed the natural savagery of the tongue. For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.⁶⁶

This apparently proleptic reference to intertextuality chimes in with Thomas's dedication to *The Icknield Way*:

[It is] another of those books made out of books founded on other books. Being but half mine it can only be half yours, and I owe you an apology as well as a dedication. It is, however, in some ways a fitting book for me to write. For it is about a road which begins many miles before I could come on its traces and ends miles beyond where I had to stop.⁶⁷

In this dedication, Thomas makes a clear link between the intertextuality created by a lengthy literary and oral tradition and the consequent unfinishedness of any particular work when viewed on its own, set as it is within that tradition. This resonates with the Japanese attitude to poetry. As Chamberlain notes in the late nineteenth century, the Japanese view poetry 'more as the product of an epoch than of an individual'. The words Chamberlain uses to describe Japanese poetry and poetic devices, such as the *kakekotoba*, forming an 'elliptical and enigmatic style, which continually crosses the border-line of obscurity', could easily be applied to Thomas's own verse, indicating, therefore, connections that reach across not only temporal but also cultural boundaries.⁶⁸

coming out of finishedness

Of course you always fail, but as Beckett said: 'Fail again, fail better.'⁶⁹

Carol Ann Duffy

In his writing life, Thomas moved from an appreciation of 'finish' in a creative piece to a desire for 'unfinishedness'. One of his major early influences was Walter Pater, who, Thomas notes, 'used to purge my writing of its excess'.⁷⁰ In a passage that draws

⁶⁶ *A Room of One's Own*, p. 98.

⁶⁷ *Icknield Way*, dedication, pp. vi-vii.

⁶⁸ *Things Japanese*, p. 374.

⁶⁹ Elisa Bray, 'The 5-Minute Interview: Carol Ann Duffy', *Independent*, 13 August 2005, p. 10.

⁷⁰ Thomas to Harry Hooton while at university, cited in R. G. Thomas, *A Portrait*, p. 54.

once again on architectural imagery when expressing thoughts on the use of language in composition, Thomas writes that

there is some sort of morality in strenuously achieving a nearly perfect style, in building, as the Greeks said, ('build the lofty rhyme') the cottage of the temple of living sounds. Pater is, I am sure, the only example of his own theories. Robert Louis S[tevenson] is far below him, though he too consciously builds. I always think style, in its limited point – the perfect sentence, is like the casting by a spider of its thin thread far out from itself towards some remote object, to attain which is its intent, but to fall short of which by a hair's breadth is to fail utterly.⁷¹

However, Thomas's admiration for such 'finished' prose does not last. As Longley notes, Paterian prose later represents for him 'a literariness and wordiness of which Thomas wished to purge himself'.⁷² Thomas expresses this disaffection most fully in his critical book on Pater, in which he quotes the words of Oscar Wilde, who wrote that Pater's prose is 'often far more like a piece of mosaic than a passage in music'.⁷³ Thomas amplifies this comment with his own image: 'On almost every page of his [Pater's] writing words are to be seen sticking out, like raisins that will get burnt on an ill-made cake.'⁷⁴ Pater's processes of composing leave visible and conspicuous marks on his completed prose. As a result, this prose appears too controlled and finished. In the same passage, Thomas goes on to describe composing processes that allow for the contribution of 'unknown powers'. He contrasts these with the control that is so evident in Paterian prose:

The most and the greatest of man's powers are as yet little known to him, and are scarcely more under his control than the weather: he cannot keep a shop without trusting somewhat to his unknown powers, nor can he write books except such as are no books. It appears to have been Pater's chief fault, or the cause of his faults, that he trusted these powers too little. The alternative supposition is that he did not carry his self-conscious labours far enough.

The reference to the weather in this passage is a reminder of the importance of the influence of the external environment on the composing process. Thomas also refers to this in 'Beauty'. The poet's initial act of framing an epitaph is carried out inside a house. It fails because it is too controlled, resisting the influence of 'unknown powers' and excluding the natural outdoor environment. In contrast, the successful act occurs outdoors, when a 'fraction' of his mind slips out of the window. In a sense, the

⁷¹ Thomas to Hooton, *Letters to Helen*, pp. 124-5 (13 November 1897).

⁷² Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, p. 31; see also R. G. Thomas, *A Portrait*, p. 131, p. 173, p. 239.

⁷³ 'The Critic as Artist', in *The Works of Oscar Wilde* (Leicester: Galley Press, 1987), p. 955. Originally published in 1891. Thomas cited this in *Walter Pater* (London: Martin Secker, 1913), p. 219.

⁷⁴ Thomas, *Pater*, p. 213.

poem is, therefore, advocating an 'open air' process of composing, similar to the open air work of the Impressionist painters, and similar, too, to Thomas's practice of taking notes and drafting poems when travelling, if not in the open air, then on transport through the open air of the countryside. In such a situation, the outcome of the poem is influenced by an environment that is clearly beyond the control of the poet. As a result, the completed poem retains a sense of unfinishedness.

Thomas also stresses the ways in which the natural environment can enhance a creative work. These can result in apparently 'finished' work undergoing further transformations. In 'Reading out of doors', for example, Thomas presents books as capable of being inhabited by the environment in which they are read. He explains this phenomenon, once again, in terms of architecture, writing: 'Nature does on their [printed books'] behalf as she does sometimes for cheap architecture. She festoons them with ivy flowers; the birds sing and build close by.'⁷⁵ This continued effect that its environment can have on a written work is given graphic illustration in Wordsworth's references, discussed earlier in Chapter One, to the continued weathering of epitaphs when placed outside in graveyards. Thomas's own epitaph poems, such as 'A Tale' and 'Tall Nettles', also incorporate within their content references to the natural processes of change brought about by seasonal and weather conditions. The weeds, nettles and 'the dust on the nettles' in these poems have a strong effect upon the man-made buildings, such as cottages and farms, and tools, such as pumps, rollers and ploughs (*CP*, 151, 307).

The epitaph is, in fact, a good exemplar for the unfinished but completed poem. As age-old formulae of words, epitaphs pre-exist their carvers. Their beginnings lie in oral literature. They also have no end, surviving long after their writers have been forgotten. Compared to other forms of writing, they are, too, more obviously separated from their subject-matter by time, since they are set up specifically to remember what is gone, and so highlight the belatedness of their own composing process. This is explored in Thomas's recording of the naming of a lane as 'Bob's Lane' in his poem that bears the same title. This name in fact acts as an epitaph, since not only has Bob, the namer of the lane, died, but also the lane itself no longer exists. As observed earlier, the lane is named as such only when it has lost its function as name.

⁷⁵ 'Reading out of doors', *Atlantic Monthly*, 92, p. 276.

into strangeness and looseness

When I was the age of these children I could draw like Raphael: it took me many years to learn how to draw like these children.⁷⁶

Pablo Picasso

- a sense of rhythmic incompleteness similar to that in Japanese haiku.⁷⁷

William Higginson

Thomas's increasing preference for a more unfinished look in his writing is also evident in changes in his sentence structure. As early as 1906, he observes 'how careless of the minutiae of form I get – long rambling sentences, which I know to be imperfect. I hope it means that I am getting into a truer method.'⁷⁸ The adjectives 'long' and 'rambling' evoke the nettles that take over the farmyard in his epitaph poem 'Tall Nettles', once again illustrating the importance of the epitaph form in a consideration of unfinishedness in poetry. Thomas's preference for a looser structure is also indicated in his admiration for the flexible attitude to form evinced by his young daughter, Myfanwy, in 1914:

She sang four or five verses of 'John Peel' the other morning without one line of sense, yet using hardly one word that isn't in the song, just transposing and rearranging, retaining only the tune and the metre. Some lines were better than ever but I can't remember one.⁷⁹

Such observations of a fluid and free use of music, and Thomas's stated preference for 'All round my hat' or 'Somer is icumen in' to Beethoven (*SC*, 4), put in context his criticism of Pater's attempts to aspire 'towards the condition of music' in his prose and of Pater's tendency 'to conventionalise the strange, to turn all things great and small into a coldly pathetic strain of music'.⁸⁰

The quality Thomas sees as lacking in Pater's prose and which he admires in his daughter's rendition of 'John Peel' is a fluidity that is never finished, always in flux. As Thomas implies in his comment on his failure to recall accurately Myfanwy's new lines, this is a quality that epitomises the oral tradition, handed down, remembered and misremembered, through generations. The interest Thomas evinces

⁷⁶ Herbert Read, 'Picasso at 75', *The Times*, 27 October 1956, p. 7.

⁷⁷ William J. Higginson and Penny Harter, *The Haiku Handbook: How to Write, Share, and Teach Haiku* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1985) p. 105.

⁷⁸ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 120 (4 September 1906).

⁷⁹ Thomas to John Freeman, BL, MS RP 1791, Letters to John Freeman, folio 20 (14 August 1914).

⁸⁰ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, 6th edn (London: Macmillan, 1901), p.135; Thomas, *Pater*, p. 96. As Bottomley notes, Thomas had 'little patience or interest for organised music', 'A Note on Edward Thomas', *Welsh Review*, 4.3 (September 1945), 166-76 (p. 170).

in his daughter's experimentation with language is also familiar in the work of Modernist writers such as Woolf, James Joyce and Gertrude Stein.⁸¹ It occurs elsewhere in Thomas's work, too, in his record of the ability of children's voices to interrupt and shatter the perspectives of the adult voice, as seen, for example, in his poem 'The Brook'.⁸²

The importance to Thomas of a fluid unfinished approach to writing and to language is also expressed in his championship of 'old ballads and folksongs' that, he reports, 'come to us imploring a new lease of life on the sweet earth'. Unlike Pater's carefully constructed conventional 'strain of music', which Thomas sees as distanced both from the strangeness of its source and from its listener, the flexibility inherent in the oral tradition has an invigorating result. In *The Heart of England*, which, significantly, he concludes with the music and words of a number of songs, Thomas writes of one ballad that 'the strangeness and looseness of its framework allowed each man to see himself therein'.⁸³ In addition, the balladic tradition provides him with a model for his mature verse, as indicated in the passage from *The South Country* quoted in Chapter One: 'Can [the recovery of old ballads] possibly give a vigorous impulse to a new school of poetry'? (*SC*, 241). Many of his poems acknowledge old ballads or folksongs. Four include the word 'song' in their title. In addition, 'The Ash Grove' borrows its title from a song; and 'Early one morning', entitled 'Song [3]' in the 1978 *Collected Poems*, is written 'to the tune of Rio Grande'.⁸⁴

When admiring Myfanwy's flexible arrangements of 'John Peel', Thomas highlights the constant rhythmic core in her arrangements of 'the tune and the metre'.⁸⁵ In his discussion of style in *Pater* he also emphasises the importance of rhythm, writing that 'rhythm is of the essence of a sincere expressive style. Pater's rhythm is intermittent, and, except in short passages like that on La Gioconda it is

⁸¹ See Deborah Thacker, 'New voices, new threats', *Introducing Children's Literature*, ed. by Deborah Cogan Thacker and Jean Webb (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2002), pp. 101-13.

⁸² For discussion of Thomas's connection with Modernism, see, for example, Thacker, 'Robert Frost and Edward Thomas', p. 17, pp. 86 – 93; Wilmer, 'Edward Thomas: Englishness and Modernity', *PN Review* 138, 59-64; also, John Powell Ward, 'The Solitary Note, Edward Thomas and Modernism', in Jonathan Barker, ed., *The Art of Edward Thomas* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1987), pp. 57-8. In addition, Briggs discusses Thomas's connection with Virginia Woolf, Briggs, pp. 379-9. This connection was also emphasised in Jem Poster's lecture, 'Edward Thomas as Modernist', at the *Edward Thomas and Contemporary Poetry* conference, St Edmund Hall, Oxford University, 12 March 2005.

⁸³ *The Heart of England*, p. 207, p. 208.

⁸⁴ *Last Four Years*, p. 199 (c. June 1916).

⁸⁵ Thomas to John Freeman, BL, MS RP 1791, Letters to John Freeman, folio 20 (14 August 1914).

rarely emotional.’⁸⁶ Thomas then continues this passage by alluding to Oscar Wilde, who, he says, was ‘too vigorous to fall into this error’. As noted earlier, Thomas directly quotes Wilde in *Pater* more than once, and is heavily influenced by Wilde in his criticism of Pater’s ‘finished’ prose. His reference to Wilde at this point is particularly significant, since Wilde also argues for a shift away from the written page to the rhythms of speech, writing in ‘The Critic as Artist’:

Since the introduction of printing, and the fatal development of the habit of reading amongst the middle and lower classes of this country, there has been a tendency in literature to appeal more and more to the eye, and less and less to the ear.⁸⁷

Wilde also writes, ‘Yes: writing has done much harm to writers. We must return to the voice.’⁸⁸ This view results in some extreme experimentation, as Dowling records:

Wilde then experimented with his own speech to test the limits of what could be perfectly said with neither affectation nor the lame gait of ordinary talk. Hence Yeats’s astonishment when he first heard Wilde ‘talking with perfect sentences, as if he had written them all overnight with labour and yet all spontaneous.’⁸⁹

Dowling points out that such a performative ideal necessitates ‘an entire assent to the evanescence and final extinction of the spoken work of art’, and results for Wilde in work that is necessarily self-exhausting and cannot be secured through written language.⁹⁰ As a result, Wilde outlasts his performed work. This is noted by Yeats, who writes that Wilde was ‘the greatest talker of his time, and his plays and dialogues have what merit they possess from being now an imitation, now a record, of his talk’.⁹¹ Dowling, too, reports: ‘It was only when Wilde ceased to speak his tales and elaborated them in print that his style – as Yeats and Robert Ross and André Gide all agreed - stiffened into artifice.’⁹² Thomas also refers to the artifice of Wilde’s writing, criticising him for his ‘decorative instinct’.⁹³

Although Thomas himself argues for ‘the necessity for the aid of speech in literature’, unlike Wilde, he accepts that there are limitations to the artist’s control of

⁸⁶ *Pater*, p. 218.

⁸⁷ ‘The Critic as Artist’, p. 955.

⁸⁸ ‘The Critic as Artist’, p. 956.

⁸⁹ Dowling, p. 185. The quotation is from Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1926), p. 160.

⁹⁰ Dowling, p. 187.

⁹¹ Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 172.

⁹² Dowling, p. 186, fn. 14.

⁹³ A review of ‘Wit and Dalliance’, *Daily Chronicle*, 13 April 1908, p. 3.

that sound.⁹⁴ As seen in Chapter Two, in 1904 Thomas describes himself as composing 'blindfold', writing to 'dictation'.⁹⁵ This experience continues throughout his writing life. In 1914, he writes of his verse in a letter to Frost, whose poetic theories were close to his own, that 'the rhymes have dictated themselves decidedly except in one case'.⁹⁶ Previously, in 1910, he states in *Feminine Influence on the Poets* that 'love-poetry, like all other lyric poetry, is in a sense unintentionally overheard, and only by accident and in part understood'.⁹⁷ So, in the process of composing, and in the completed poem, Thomas sees the poet's and the reader's access to that poem as limited. This limited access is related to the unfinishedness of the completed piece, and contrasts with Wilde's attempts at total control of the composing process in his production of what Yeats referred to as 'perfect sentences'.⁹⁸ It is worth noting at this point that Wilde's emphasis on perfection of performance also contrasts with Olson's later use of unfinishedness in terms of gaps on the page as a representation of the process of performance.

In the context of Thomas's blindfolded writer, it is also worth recalling Woolf's reference to self-imposed restrictions created by half shutting the eyes in order to 'visualize books as a whole' in her review of Thomas's *A Literary Pilgrim*. This indicates that, just as Thomas suggests in his use of the image of a blindfold that a writer's vision is necessarily restricted when in the act of composing, so readers, if they wish to have a full experience of a work that includes its unfinished and unwritten 'rough large outline', need to restrict their access to it.⁹⁹ The significance of such tangential approaches to compositions and to the composing process will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

Thomas's criticism of what he calls Pater's 'tin soldier' words is based, as has been shown earlier, on their lack of rhythm and emotion: 'They refuse to fall into the rhythms which only emotion can command.'¹⁰⁰ It has already been shown how emotion is contained in the space rather than, or as well as, in the words of a poem. Thomas's criticism of Pater indicates that, for him, the emotional life of a piece also resides in its shifting and unfinished rhythms. He writes that 'the book is a poem; I

⁹⁴ Pater, p. 218.

⁹⁵ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 53 (17 March 1904).

⁹⁶ *Elected Friends: R.F. & E.T.*, p. 39 (15 December 1914).

⁹⁷ *Feminine Influence*, p. 76.

⁹⁸ Yeats, *Autobiographies*, p. 160.

⁹⁹ Woolf, *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 October 1917, p. 489.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas, Pater, p. 215, p. 218.

had almost said a piece of music. The ideas rise up and fall, lose their outlines, and, resurgent again, have not fulfilled their whole purpose until the full-charged silence of the conclusion' and that 'poetry in verse is at one with the tides and the pulse'.¹⁰¹ His use of tidal imagery to describe these rhythms emphasises their essential fluidity and the tensions that are set up between different but simultaneously occurring rhythms. Robert Frost approaches the subject of poetic composition in a similar way, as is evident in a letter written at the time he was having lengthy discussions with Thomas about poetry. Frost writes: 'I like to drag and break the intonation across the meter as waves first comb and then break stumbling on the shingle.'¹⁰² So, for both poets, the unfinished quality of such rhythms, breaking and 'stumbling', is crucial.

References to multiple and conflicting rhythms also occur in Thomas's poems, as in the 'cross breezes cut[ting] the surface' in 'Beauty'. They appear, too, indirectly in the many allusions to the crossing of roads, as in 'Aspens', 'The Signpost', 'The Green Road' and 'Up in the Wind'. The conflict between different rhythms in his poems occurs when speech and metrical rhythms pull against each other in and across the lines of the poems. As Peter Levi puts it, in Thomas's poetry, 'the use of an individuated vernacular speech tone [is] in descant with conventional metre and with itself'.¹⁰³ In 'The Mill-Water', for example, Thomas employs a *kakekotoba*-like effect, with the result that the rhythm strains against the sense, as qualifications of what has already been written are suggested and then delayed at each line ending:

Sometimes a thought is drowned
By it, sometimes
Out of it climbs. (*CP*, 235)

In these lines, thought drowns, but it also climbs. The second use of 'sometimes' in the above quotation acts to confirm the frequency of the experience of drowning 'sometimes', as well as introducing the reference to the frequency of the experience of climbing. Further examples of tension between syntax and metre are recorded in detail by Longley in 'Interval', 'Gone, gone again', 'Aspens' and 'October'. In 'Aspens', for example, she observes how 'the metre, veering between iambic and trisyllabic stress patterns, interacts with the syntactical pull between statement and qualification'.¹⁰⁴ This is evident in the last lines:

¹⁰¹ Thomas, *Jefferies*, p. 203; *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 158 (26 February 1908).

¹⁰² Frost to John Curnos, *Selected Letters*, p. 128 (8 July 1914).

¹⁰³ Peter Levi, 'Notes on Edward Thomas', in Barker, pp. 25-35 (p. 35).

¹⁰⁴ For more detailed discussion, see Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* pp. 66-67, p. 72.

We cannot other than an aspen be
That ceaselessly, unreasonably grieves,
Or so men think who like a different tree. (CP, 233)

So, Thomas's apparently loose rhythmic structure hides an intricate interplay between metre and speech rhythms. De la Mare observes this in his instruction to the reader in the preface to Thomas's 1920 *Collected Poems*. This is worth quoting again here, since it exemplifies in the deceptive smoothness of its own syntax and rhythm, the very quality it alludes to in Thomas's verse: 'Loose-woven, monotonous, unrelieved, the verse, as verse, may appear to a careless reader accustomed to the customary. It must be read slowly, as naturally as if it were talk, without much emphasis.'¹⁰⁵ It takes a deliberate effort to follow the unusually arranged word-order of these sentences. They state the need for the reader to make a deliberate effort when reading Thomas's work, and they exemplify that need as well. The need for deliberate effort is also suggested by Thomas himself when he attributes Pater's stylistic faults to the fact that Pater has not carried 'his self-conscious labours far enough'.¹⁰⁶ Just as reading 'loose-woven' rhythms requires deliberate effort and sustained 'labour', so does the act of composing them.

In an exchange of letters with Garnett, Thomas defends himself from Garnett's accusations of "intolerably affected" passages and deliberately cultivated "literary" phrases that "smell of the lamp" in the story, 'The Attempt'. He does so by arguing that 'such phrases however bad came to me without thinking or seeking. It is your "simple & direct" phrases that I have to seek for.'¹⁰⁷ Non-closure and simple rough 'unfinish', Thomas implies, are skilful manoeuvres, not easily achieved by the writer.

Ruskin also suggests the importance of deliberate effort in a passage that discusses sculpting with a chisel. In accordance with the aesthetic of unfinishedness, he prefers 'coarse' and 'blunt cutting' over 'cold cutting – the look of equal trouble everywhere'.¹⁰⁸ In Japanese aesthetics, too, deliberate effort in composing is related to the preparation of tools used. Kenkō emphasises the deliberate calculation necessary when working for such unfinishedness. He writes: 'I am told that a good craftsman always uses a knife which is the least little bit blunt. Myōkwan's knife did not cut

¹⁰⁵ *Collected Poems* (1920), foreword, p. x.

¹⁰⁶ *Pater*, p. 213.

¹⁰⁷ *Letters to Garnett*, p. 12 (undated letter placed between letters dated 13 February 1909 and 30 March 1909); Thomas's 'The Attempt' was subsequently published in *Light*, pp. 160-73.

¹⁰⁸ *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, in *The Works of John Ruskin: Library Edition*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 38 vols (London: George Allen, 1903 – 1912), VIII (1903), p. 214.

perfectly.’¹⁰⁹ The poet aims for an imperfect finish, just like the Japanese tea master, Rikyū, who, according to apocrypha, ‘shook the maple-trees to make the leaves fall’ on a path that had recently been swept in order to give it a more natural look.¹¹⁰ Here, ‘unfinish’ is produced by calculated effort over an area previously ‘swept’ into neatness, the result being that the process of cleaning continues beyond the point of neatness and finality.

There is also the possibility that the practice of unfinishedness results in a poem that continues for too long. This is exemplified in ‘unfamiliar’, one of *The Drier The Brighter* poems. I note of an early draft of this poem that it is ‘really hard to get balance between contrived and meaningful’. Significantly, it is the ending, the finishing point, with which I have the most difficulty. For a number of drafts this ending reads:

; instead let space
stay unfamiliar
, for more
means less
, less
more

111

My redrafting of this somewhat expositional ending occurs as a result of a criticism by Geoff Caplan of this particular version as clichéd and ‘trying too hard’, a criticism which highlights the deficiencies of the network of response-inviting structures in this draft.¹¹² In a later draft, therefore, as well as reducing the incidence of spaced punctuation, although compensating for this by highlighting the remaining instances in bold, I replace the final ‘more’ with ‘sure’:

; instead let space
stay unfamiliar
so more of

¹⁰⁹ Kenkō, p. 170 (Section 229)

¹¹⁰ Noguchi, *English Writings*, II, 66. Published in *The Spirit of Japanese Poetry* in London in 1914. See also Donald Keene, *The Pleasures of Japanese Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 21.

¹¹¹ Records, filed under ‘angel cake’, various drafts from 10 April to 16 May 2004.

¹¹² Geoff Caplan, Email Responses, 22 September 2004.

less is

sure

113

This amendment is greeted with more satisfaction by readers, who prefer its greater uncertainty. Barbara Dordi notes that ‘the fullstop at the end leaves “sure” up in the air and therefore less “sure”.’¹¹⁴ My dependence in this drafting process on readers’ feedback contrasts with Thomas’s dismissal of Garnett’s criticism of his poetry. Thomas is confident that he has already arrived at what he calls ‘a truer method’, noting to Garnett that ‘chiselling’ every line ‘would not really improve’ the poem.¹¹⁵ I note that ‘I am conscious of searching, for a different style, a different way of writing. I do not like the clipped box hedge stuff I tend to produce at the moment, and would quite like to be messier.’¹¹⁶ I am still wishing for more unfinishedness, and, as the version of ‘unfamiliar’ eventually selected for inclusion in *The Drier The Brighter* indicates in its omission of the last word of the sentence, I am still uncertain about the ending of ‘sure’.¹¹⁷

suspended

Nature has no arrangement, no plan¹¹⁸

Richard Jefferies

In digital poetry, which often involves kinetic and interactive transformations, unfinishedness is also a central concern. It is quite usual for a digital poem to be altered drastically during the period of reading it. At any one point, it is never finished. It exists in movement. When the piece is interactive, every reading is also likely to differ. Depending on the power and size of the computer used, the presentation may vary, and even the speed of the piece may be different. This last point is not only an issue for the reader. In the case of collaborators at a distance communicating by email, such as digital artist Steven Earnshaw and myself, it affects

¹¹³ Records, filed under ‘unfamiliar’ c. October/November 2004.

¹¹⁴ Dordi, Email Responses, 22 November 2004.

¹¹⁵ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 120 (4 September 1906); *Letters to Garnett*, p. 29 (undated letter placed after 21 April 1915 and before 19 January 1917).

¹¹⁶ Kendall to Gross, Email Responses, 17 January 2003.

¹¹⁷ See *Brighter*, p. 266.

¹¹⁸ Richard Jefferies, ‘Hours of Spring’, in *Field and Hedgerow, being the last essays* (London: Longmans, Green, 1889), p. 18.

the process of collaboration, since the collaborators, viewing the poem on different machines, may experience it at different speeds. The physical shape of a digital poem also often remains indeterminate, involving a further degree of 'unfinished'. In this kind of poetry, therefore, provision has to be made for an unknown element of suspension or open-endedness.

As a consequence of these qualities in digital work, issues of unfinishedness predominate, particularly for readers who are unused to this form and so approach it as if reading a conventional layout on the page. Their responses to the digital version of 'Dandelion Vision', for example, typically include comments such as Mary Ann Mooradian's 'Your dandelions kept moving, so I didn't know if it was "over" or not', and Caplan's 'it takes over 40 seconds for the seeds to float off the text. And by the time they clear, the words have started to float off, so you never see the poem as a whole.'¹¹⁹

Taken to an extreme, the unfinishedness of digital poetry can result in work that is no longer recognizable as a poem. For example, the kinetic interaction in 'Plough's Progress', the page version of which is included in *The Drier The Brighter*, increases as it is gradually adapted from the page to the screen, until the interaction takes over from the fixed words on the page. As a result, in the final digital version of the piece, the text is barely evident. It could be argued, therefore, that this piece is no longer a poem but a new form.

Due to the novelty of digital art forms, their readers and creators are still learning the patterns such pieces are capable of holding, and, as a corollary of this, they are still discovering the extent to which these pieces can remain unfinished. Until the patterns in such pieces are better understood by their writers and readers, it is difficult to gauge their success as pieces of creative art. However, digital artists also exploit this uncertainty. Earnshaw, for example, writes approvingly of the interactive version of 'Plough's Progress' that there is 'plenty to discover in it' and that 'people will be rewarded the more time they spend with it.'¹²⁰ This is also familiar territory for

¹¹⁹ Caplan, Email on Web Poetry, 20 November 2004; also, Mary Ann Mooradian, 20 November 2004.
¹²⁰ Earnshaw to Kendall, Email on Web Poetry, 9 May 2003. For the page version of 'Plough's Progress', see *Brighter*, p. 238. For the digital version, and for other digital poems such as 'Dandelion Vision' and 'how your whole life', see Earnshaw, www.shu.ac.uk/schools/cs/teaching/sle/earnshaw/gallery/.

Thomas. He attributes readers' difficulties with his 'sufficiently new' verse to their inability or reluctance to 'consider and see their [the poems]' "unfinish".¹²¹

As shown in the endings to *The Drier The Brighter* poem 'unfamiliar', the unfinished quality present in poems can also extend to their endings. In Thomas's case, he directly relates his use of suspended endings in his work to the uncertainties of his time, observing, after his comment on his own tendency to 'down & blank & something new' in his writing, that 'perhaps we worry less about conclusions, generalizations nowadays, in our anxiety to get the facts & feelings down - just as science picks up a million pebbles & can't arrange them or even play with them'.¹²² He also makes a specific link between suspended endings and the conditions of the time in his discussion of Jefferies's novel, *After London*, written in 1885. The story of *After London*, as Jeremy Hooker has observed, 'replaces the centre with the margins' as it tracks what would happen if nature reclaimed the city, transforming it into a wasteland.¹²³ The novel ends with Felix, 'absorbed in thought', walking off into the distance, 'still onward; and as the dusk fell he was still moving rapidly westwards'.¹²⁴ The 'suspended breath' of this ending, as Thomas describes it, continues the theme of the novel, order reverting into chaos, or, more specifically, the structure of urban conglomerates being replaced with the more fluid organic activity of nature, continually in process.¹²⁵

When commenting on these closing words of *After London*, Thomas argues for the general adoption of such endings:

That is the end. It is a wilful one, as if on a hexameter instead of a pentameter, yet it needs no defence. Others could have been found to conform to the needs of perhaps a majority. But to end with suspended breath is as true to Nature, and in keeping with this age; it might be used as a variation upon 'happily ever after' or 'necessity is great'.¹²⁶

Thomas's preference for suspended endings is also evident in *Feminine Influence* when he qualifies Coleridge's definitive statement on the artist in *Biographia Literaria*. First, he quotes Coleridge's statement that the artist 'must imitate that which is within the thing'. Then he adds that 'there are no musts in art, only an infinite

¹²¹ Jesse Berridge, p. 78 (1 June 1915).

¹²² *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 140 (14 May 1907),

¹²³ Hooker, *Writers in a Landscape* (Cardiff: University of Wales), 1996, p. 43.

¹²⁴ Richard Jefferies, *After London, or Wild England* (London: Cassell, 1885; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 241.

¹²⁵ Thomas, *Jefferies*, p. 260.

¹²⁶ *Jefferies*, p. 260.

may'.¹²⁷ He also alludes to this emphasis on 'may' rather than 'must' in *Jefferies*, relating his appreciation of suspension of a sequential logic in works of art to the aesthetic of asymmetry. He writes:

'There is,' he [Jefferies] says, 'no design and no evolution.' The sequence from cause to effect does not seem to him inevitable. There is no 'must' – which recalls the brook's 'there is no why.' The balance of logic does not correspond with life, with the irregular human frame, the unbalanced tree.¹²⁸

The reference to the brook is an allusion to Jefferies's *Wood Magic*, in which the natural environment is identified as having 'no design and no evolution'. Thomas cites the relevant *Wood Magic* passage earlier in *Jefferies*, as follows: 'We have been listening to the brook, me and my family, for ever so many thousands of years, and though the brook has been talking and singing all that time, I never heard him ask why about anything.'¹²⁹ Such a description resonates with the structure of Thomas's own work, and, in particular, with the structure of his prose writings. These writings often consist of a series of prose poems loosely strung together, as implied in Thomas's comment to Bottomley in reference to *The South Country*: 'So far I have no scheme, no frame on which to hang my landscapes, etc.'¹³⁰ This approach to structure is like the flow of the brook, which is for Thomas a concrete, if typically fluid, image of the suspended unfinished logic that can occur in creative writing.

Conclusion

Thomas's preference for what remains open, unresolved and unfinished makes him an exemplary poet of the absent, of gaps and of the unfinished, as well as of ellipses and aporia. This can be seen, for example, in his insistent focus on periods of transition such as twilight or the period before twilight, evident in his choice of the titles, *Light and Twilight*, 'Interval' with its 'brief twilight' (*CP*, 39-41), and 'The Bridge' with its

moment brief between
Two lives, when the Night's first lights
And shades hide what has never been. (*CP*, 123)

¹²⁷ *Feminine Influence*, p. 141; see also Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. by John Shawcross, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907) II, 259. First published in 1817.

¹²⁸ *Jefferies*, p. 201.

¹²⁹ Richard Jefferies in *Wood Magic*, cited by Thomas in *Jefferies*, p. 158.

¹³⁰ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 165 (19 July 1908). See also Bottomley, 'A Note on Edward Thomas', *Welsh Review*, 4.3 (September 1945), 171-172; also, R. G. Thomas, *A Portrait*, pp. 200-01.

However, as the image of the bridge suggests, his preference, in this articulation of what is absent and unfinished, is for a balanced transition that rests deliberately between points of resolution. This is combined with an aversion to closed formal composition, and to commissioned writing. He observes, for example, that

the length of an article demanded by an editor has no necessary connection with the subject of it. In prose such lengths are as destructive to order and beauty as the fourteen lines of a sonnet commonly are to sense.¹³¹

He also writes that 'I have a dread of the sonnet. It must contain 14 lines, and a man must be a tremendous poet or a cold mathematician if he can accommodate his thought to such a condition.'¹³² These preferences resonate with Japanese aesthetics in which the irregular is valued above the regular, and in which, as Kenkō observes, it is 'better to have dissimilarity'. In Japanese aesthetics, too, such dissimilarity has its own balance, as Kenkō emphasises when he praises a garden with 'its old clump of trees, its garden plants not artificially trained but with a meaning of their own, its bench of bamboo, its well-adapted little hedge and its furniture placed naturally', preferring it to one where plants and trees are 'trained in a meaningless fashion'.¹³³ The scene Kenkō admires is not one of disordered chaos or artificial order, but a meaningful and considered adaptation of the natural organic processes of nature. A similar balance is evident in the carefully judged provisionality of Thomas's endings, alternative readings, asymmetry, non-linear sequences and, most evidently, in the rhythmic tensions of his poetry.

There is an unmistakable focus, too, on transition and process in Thomas's poetry, on what is not yet finished and only half-articulated. This is particularly the case in his use of rhythm, as many critics have noted. J. P. Ward, for example, remarks that 'many lines direct their rhythm to something not finally said, to something half-verbalised and elusive. This has of course been repeatedly noticed about Thomas; it is inescapable.'¹³⁴ A balance is retained in the unevenness of the rhythms as they pull towards one pattern only to veer into another. In this way, they dislocate any tendency to resolution and finishedness of 'tune' or 'metre'.

¹³¹ *Jefferies*, p. 128.

¹³² *Jesse Berridge*, p. 36 (2 November 1902).

¹³³ Kenkō, *Miscellany of a Japanese Priest*, p. 67 (Section 82), pp. 15-16 (Section 10).

¹³⁴ *Barker*, p. 56.

Thomas's confidence in resting within unfinishedness contrasts with my desire to attain such a quality, to be 'messier.'¹³⁵ However, in *The Drier The Brighter* documentation, too, emphasis is placed on unfinishedness and process. This documentation also reveals much evidence of the use of gaps, aporia and ellipses, both in the composing process and in the completed poems. On one level, it can be argued that this bias towards the use of absence in composing in *The Drier The Brighter* stems from the evident influence of Japanese aesthetics in the writing of these poems and also from effects gleaned from the current study of Thomas's composing processes. However, detailed examination of *The Drier The Brighter* documentation suggests that absence is a more integral part of my composing processes, since it often occurs before I am aware of any influence from Thomas, as in the case of 'unfamiliar', or from Japanese culture and traditions, as in the case of 'absence of birdsong'. In addition, some of the poems discussed were composed very early on in the process of composing the thesis, before the study of Thomas's processes was properly underway. Examples are 'One Minute's', which makes use of ellipses and gaps, 'Lateral Moraine', which makes use of gaps, and 'Plough's Progress', which plays on qualities of unfinishedness. Another point of consideration is that such uses of absence are carried over to the very different art form of digital poetry, as seen in 'On I Tow', 'how your whole life' and 'Plough's Progress', and that these aspects are also manifest in Steven Earnshaw's collaborative work on these poems, again implying their more general use in composing, irrespective of influences from Japan and from Thomas, and outside the confines of poetry written for the page.

One aspect of the use of absence in composing that has become evident in this thesis is that it often occurs as a result of shifts in emphasis and visibility of sections of initial drafts of poems, as is clearly the case in my 'One Minute's'. Manipulation of rhythm also plays an important part, and is particularly evident in the shifting but carefully judged 'unfinish' of Thomas's completed pieces. When poems written for the page are adapted into digital poems, kinetic effects at play in the work are highlighted further. The importance of movement in the creation of absence in the composing process and in the completed pieces is closely related to an aspect of composing that will be examined further in the next chapter – that of dislocation. As this chapter will show, the shifting movements created by various kinds of dislocation

¹³⁵ Kendall to Gross, Email Responses, 17 January 2003.

can be harnessed both to create absence in a piece and also to control its effects, countering, for example, tendencies to 'over' finish a piece.

Appendix G

1 An extract from the original of a letter from Thomas to de la Mare ¹³⁶

see it . I have it to you . I
have 2 further chapters
perhaps good in themselves, but
only unpedimented like all the
other chapters . I won't send them yet.

Of course I should like to
know just what you think
useless
incomplete (excessively)
obscure
inconsistent

Has it in places a private
character in a bad sense,
preventing reader from sharing
my knowledge, real or pretended?
Does the tendency to be continuous
in the last few chapters (about
Philip) only show up the

¹³⁶ Bodleian, MS Eng lett c 376, Letters to Walter de la Mare, folio 181 (date of 5 or 12 February 1913 is added in pencil).

BERRYFIELD COTTAGE,
ASHFORD,
PETERSFIELD.

10. iii 07.

Dear Mr. de la Mare,

I am sorry you & your
wife can't come. But I gather that
you can come for a day - Do, &
if possible stay one night, since
a day with a long uncomfortable
railway journey at each end is nothing
at all but an interval. ~~It is~~

Tuesday suits me best. I
have been trying to think of a place where
we could meet in the City but I don't
know it so badly that I can only suggest
George Yard in Lombard Street. Just
inside on the left is a 'Mecca' (I think)
& I will meet you at the top of the steps
which lead down to it. I believe there are 2
George Yards but this one contains the
Deutsche Bank & is nearly opposite the
Crédit Lyonnais. I hope that is clear:
the time Tuesday next at ~~5.40~~ between
5.30 & 5.40.

Yours sincerely,
Edward Thomas.

¹³⁷ Bodleian, MS Eng lett c 376, Letters to Walter de la Mare, folio 8 (10 March 1907).

INTRODUCTION

I saw sweet Poetry turn untroubled eyes
 On shaggy Science nosing in the grass,
 For by that way poor Poetry must pass
 On her long pilgrimage to Paradise.
 He snuffled, grunted, squealed; perplexed by flies,
 Parched, weatherworn, and near of sight, alas!
 From peering close where very little was
 In dens secluded from the open skies.
 But Poetry in bravery went down,
 And called his name, soft, clear, and fearlessly;
 Stooped low, and stroked his muzzle overgrown;
 Refreshed his drought with dew; wiped pure and free
 His eyes: and lo! laughed loud for joy to see
 In those grey deeps the azure of her own.

WALTER DE LA MARE.

The blue sky, the brown soil beneath, the grass, the trees, the animals, the wind, and rain, and sun, and stars are never strange to me; for I am in and of and one with them; and my flesh and the soil are one, and the heat in my blood and in the sunshine are one, and the winds and tempests and my passions are one.

W. H. HUDSON.

MATTHEW ARNOLD was, I think, the first English critic to point out the importance of the interpretation of Nature in literature. "The grand power of poetry," he says, "is its interpretative power; by which I mean, not a power of drawing out in black and white an explanation of the mystery of the universe, but the power of so dealing with things as to awaken in us a wonderfully full, new, and intimate sense of them, and of our relations with them." In the same essay, and in "Celtic Literature" and elsewhere, he quotes passages which show more or less precisely what he means by interpretation and especially by interpretation of Nature, and he coins the phrase "natural magic" for this element in literature at its highest power. But it is noticeable that he cannot illustrate his point from English prose, for it was not until some time after his essay was written that any men, except Shelley in "The Coliseum" and De Quincey and Coleridge in a few passages, had dealt with Nature in prose and in a spirit that was not simply observant. If we look farther back, we shall be disappointed if we expect to find an English prose

¹³⁸ *The Book of the Open Air*, 1, v.

CHAPTER FOUR Dislocation

behind us already the green
trees are deserting their leaves ¹
W. G. Sebald

Dislocation lies at the heart of the composing process. Physical and temporal dislocation and dislocatory effects are employed in the act of naming and in the process of composing. Dislocation is also evident in the tangential and associative thought processes of the composing writer, and in acts of writing and reading. In addition, the experience of composing when the attention has been distracted is a commonly recorded phenomenon.

Temporal Dislocation

a past charged with the time of the now ²
Walter Benjamin

Temporal dislocation in poetry can occur when experiences relating to one period of time affect poetry written at another period of time. This applies both to the drafting process and the completed work, and has an influence on readers' interpretation of the piece, and, in the case of the writer, who acts as his or her own reader, on the way in which a draft develops.

¹ 'As the Snow in the Alps', in *After Nature*, trans. by Michael Hamburger (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2002), p. 27.

² 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968; repr. Schocken, 1969), pp. 253-64 (p. 253, Section xiv).

in completed works

My work is often three steps ahead of me.³
Sam Taylor Wood

To make new boots from the remains of old⁴
Oxford English Dictionary

In the introduction to the 2004 edition of Thomas's *Collected Poems*, Peter Sachs sums up Thomas as a 'tramp in spirit'. Thomas, he says, writes with an 'effortless peripheral vision' poems that are 'typically aslope', requiring the reader to tread a series of paths 'in or beyond the margin of the road'.⁵ The central position that dislocation holds in Thomas's completed works is indicated by the fact that each of these phrases alludes to a process of dislocation. In the actual poems, this becomes particularly evident in terms of temporal dislocation, and is directly addressed by Thomas in a poem that, as previous references to it have indicated, revolves around the relation of temporal dislocation to the process of composing or 'naming'. The poem is 'Bob's Lane'.

Dislocation as it relates to naming is also evident in the evolution of the title of this poem as it goes through successive drafts and editions. The 1978 *Collected Poems* uses Thomas's initial provisional title 'Bob's Lane'.⁶ This title refers directly to the poem's apparent subject-matter, the naming and description of a particular lane. However, the title used in most other editions of Thomas's work is the one Thomas finally adopted in 1917 *Poems*: 'Women he liked'.⁷ The phrase 'women he liked' appears only in the title and first line of the poem. After that, the subject is dropped and never resumed. The use of 'Women he liked' as a title suggests that women will form the main focus of the poem. This makes the movement away from that topic after the first line all the more striking. Thomas's apparently contrary choice of 'Women he liked' as a title has the effect, therefore, of making the poem into a work not merely about the naming of a lane but about the dislocation involved in acts of naming. The later reversion by R. G. Thomas to Edward Thomas's earlier choice of 'Bob's Lane' as a title in the 1978 *Collected Poems* inadvertently dislocates this

³ *Desert Island Discs*, 21 January 2005, BBC Radio 4.

⁴ Part of the *OED* entry for 'to translate', *OED*, XI (1961), 266.

⁵ *Collected Poems* (2004), introduction, p. xv, p. xvi, p. xx.

⁶ See the introduction to this thesis for further discussion of discrepancies in editions of Thomas's poems.

⁷ Bodleian, MS Eng. poet. d 214, Printer's copy of *Poems*, 1917, folio 3, folio 26; see also *Last Four Years*, p. 201 (29 June 1916).

dislocating effect, stripping the poem of some of the subtleties that accompany it if 'Women he liked' is kept as its title.

By the end of this poem, an unnamed 'track' is elevated to the status of 'lane' and officially named as 'Bob's Lane'. This occurs as a result of Bob's act of planting elms along it, an act that also results in loss and destruction, since, concomitant with the track's acquisition of the name 'Lane', is the loss of its practical use as a thoroughfare. The acquisition of the name, therefore, dislocates the track from the function that had originally resulted in that name:

the mist and rain
Out of the elms have turned the lane to slough
And gloom, the name alone survives (*CP*, 339)

The thing named is affected by the process of naming. So, too, is the creator of the name. Bob not only enables the naming of the lane through his actions, but he is himself named as its creator and owner. However, he, like the lane, turns to 'slough', because, by the end of the poem, he is dead. The name of the lane, therefore, as observed in Chapter Three, becomes an epitaph, acting as a memorial both to the passing of that lane and to the passing of Bob himself. In addition, the actual poem becomes an epitaph for the act of naming, commemorating this act by its repetition of the word 'name' and by its rhyme or half-rhyme of 'name' with 'lane' or 'Lane', 'train', 'blame' and 'rain'. In the poem, therefore, naming is associated with destruction and death. It causes it and then commemorates both the act of destruction and the objects destroyed, which consist of the thing named, the namer or enabler of that name, and the history that lies behind that name.

So, 'Bob's Lane' alludes to the presence of an inherently destructive element in the creative process of naming. Both oral and printed acts of naming are implicated, since the road or place-name of 'Bob's Lane' is created as part of an oral tradition. At the same time, naming aids memory. A reminder of the lane survives in its name and it is this name rather than any 'women he liked' that remains at the end of the poem. As noted earlier, the unnamed women, identified only by Bob's attachment to them, are set aside after the first line. Despite the fact, however, that a name acts as a memory of the past, apart from the name itself, very little of the past of the lane remains at the end of 'Bob's Lane'. The elements of the past referred to in the name, the lane and Bob, have now become 'slough'. So, by means of this emphasis on dislocation, Thomas arrives at a dichotomy between the impermanence of natural

phenomena and the ultimately futile permanency of language. Just as, in this case, the lane is temporally dislocated from the name it receives, so, it is implied, will any referent be similarly divorced from its name.

Woolf also investigates this division between the named and the name in 'Anon'. When she describes the delay that separates the first attempt at human song from the birdsong that inspired it, she emphasises the temporal dislocation that accompanies even oral compositions. Before the huntsman who is inspired by birdsong begins to sing, he not only 'rested his axe against the tree for a moment', but proceeded to fell the tree and make a hut. In Woolf's example, however, the impact of the temporal dislocation separating the huntsman's eventual song from the birdsong he originally hears is softened by the anonymity of his voice and the communality of the performance, which allows the voice still to inhabit, like a bird, the environment in which it sings:

Thus the singer had his audience, but the audience was so little interested in his name that he never thought to give it. The audience itself was the singer; 'Terly, terlow' they sang; and 'By, by lullay' filling in the pauses, helping out with a chorus. Every body shared in the emotion of Anons [*sic*] song, and supplied the story.

Such a close correspondence between environment and song, with the audience becoming the singer, is denied to the printed word, which instead undergoes further dislocation. Woolf makes this clear in the following passage: 'Caxtons [*sic*] printing press foretold the end of that anonymous world; [*sic*] It is now written down: fixed; nothing will be added; even if the legend still murmurs on.' The more words are tied to specificities of time and person, the greater their dislocation from the original experience, and from any changes that may later occur. Thomas also demonstrates this in 'Bob's Lane'. The fixing of an act of naming in print heightens the dislocation that accompanies that act. In other words, the permanence of the print throws into relief the impermanence of the thing named. Paradoxically, however, although entry into print dislocates the song or place-name from the past occasion that inspired it and the voice that created or retold it, print, as Woolf observes, also has the effect of placing that song or name in a fixed past. Woolf writes: 'The printing press brought the past into existence.'⁸ As noted earlier, in 'Reading out of doors', Thomas responds to the effect brought about by dividing a work from the environment in which it is written by placing the printed book, symbolised by *Morte d'Arthur*, back in the natural

⁸ 'Anon', p. 382, p. 385.

environment. The result is an invigoration of the printed book and a return, as ‘the wood sorcery catches it’, to some of the flexibility of oral literature.⁹

The gap between the act of naming and the thing named is stressed further by Thomas in his poem ‘Adlestrop’. In the lines ‘I remember Adlestrop - /The name’, the name points backwards to the object it has named. The lines ‘What I saw / Was Adlestrop – only the name’ indicate that the name can never fully coincide with the thing named (*CP*, 71). The name that endures in the present and its referent that is fixed in the past are out of step. In this way, Thomas’s treatment of naming in ‘Bob’s Lane’ and ‘Adlestrop’ presents naming as a belated act, involving labels that are inaccurate portrayals of the phenomena that have been named. The omission in ‘Adlestrop’ of any clear record of the history or originator of the place name, ‘Adlestrop’, implies that such belatedness exists not only in the individual named poem but in the more anonymous acts of naming places in which, unlike the rare example provided by ‘Bob’s Lane’, the creator is rarely recorded.

Freudian concepts of condensation and displacement in the process of dreaming provide a useful parallel here. In a section of his chapter on dream-work in *The Interpretation of Dreams* entitled ‘The Work of Displacement’, he writes: ‘The dream is, as it were, *centred elsewhere*; its content is arranged around elements that do not constitute the central point of the dream-thoughts.’¹⁰ As noted earlier, this concept of the centre as marginal is very familiar in much of Thomas’s work, such as ‘But these things also’ and ‘The Castle of Lostormelwyn’. In particular, Freud’s concept of *nachträglichkeit*, which holds, as a central tenet, the inevitability of rewriting, or ‘retranscription’ as Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson terms it, is closely relevant, since dislocation or displacement in naming necessarily involves a rewriting of the original source. In 1896, in a letter to his friend Wilhelm Fliess, Freud emphasises the way present memories of the past can alter the representation of that past. In this letter, he explains the term *nachträglichkeit* as follows:

Our psychic mechanism has come into being by a process of stratification: the material present in the form of memory traces being subjected from time to time to a rearrangement in accordance with fresh circumstances - to a retranscription. Thus, what is essentially new about my theory is the thesis that memory is present not once but several times over, that it is laid down in various kinds of indications. (I postulated a similar kind of rearrangement some time ago [Aphasia] for the paths leading from the periphery. ...)

⁹ ‘Reading out of doors’, p. 277.

¹⁰ *Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. by Brill, p. 190. See also p. 170. Author’s emphasis.

He continues

I should like to emphasize the fact that the successive registrations represent the psychic achievement of successive epochs of life. At the boundary between two such epochs a translation of the psychic material [takes] place. I explain the peculiarities of the psychoneuroses by supposing that this translation has not taken place in the case of some of the material, which has certain consequences.¹¹

So, successive acts of memory necessarily involve interaction between different points along a time continuum. *Nachträglichkeit*, translated as 'afterwardsness' by Jean Laplanche, refers to the effect of such interaction.¹² As Nicola King explains, *nachträglichkeit* 'makes explicit the fact that memory, operating as it does in the present, must inevitably incorporate the awareness of "what wasn't known then"'.¹³ In other words, a process of stratification means that retranscriptions of past events are inevitably affected by later memories and awareness. Thomas's poem 'Digging [2]' provides a useful analogy for this concept in its description of two pipes from different ages laid close together, with the result that the speaker's awareness of each pipe is affected, as is their relation to each other.

The close relation between displacement or dislocation and the concept of *nachträglichkeit* is evident even in the etymology of *nachträglichkeit*, which holds the sense of 'carry' in its use of *träglich*, taken from the German verb *tragen*, and the sense of moving from one fixed point to another in the German preposition *nach*, 'to' or 'after'. There are parallels here with the etymology of the English words 'translate' and 'retranscription', terms used by Freud and his translators to refer to *nachträglichkeit*. It is worth noting that the German equivalents of English words with Latin roots often translate those roots into German. This applies, for example, to the word, 'translate'. In German, it becomes *übersetzen*, which means 'translate' by inference, but which carries the primary meaning of 'carry or ferry across', since *über* means 'across, beyond, to the other side' and *setzen* means 'to put, set, place'.¹⁴ As a result, the German etymological roots of words that in English are Latin-based are much more evident even to a reader who has no Latin. Freud's use of such terms, therefore, carries more import in German than in English. This means that, in the

¹¹ Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, trans., *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess 1887-1904* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 207-8 (6 December 1896).

¹² Cited in Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 11.

¹³ King, p. 11.

¹⁴ For the relevant German definitions, see *Collins German Dictionary*, 2nd rev. edn (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 661, p. 473, p. 477, p. 675, p. 605.

German text, 'translate' highlights the dislocation involved in this process, in which, according to the etymological and conventional definition of the term 'translate', meaning is ferried across from one language to another.¹⁵ Similarly, the term 'retranscription' also highlights dislocation in the act of writing, since 'trans-' holds the meaning of 'across' in reference to the Latin *scribere*, 'to write'.¹⁶

Freud's concept of *nachträglichkeit* provides a useful explanation as to why acts of naming do not connect fully either to the past or the present. The present act of naming an item is affected by present memories of that item in the past. Similarly, those memories are also affected by present knowledge. This effect is also in evidence in the process of composing written work, as Thomas observes in his comments on the disadvantages of a 'note-book habit'. He writes, when discussing Borrow's *Bible of Spain*:

Notes made on the spot are very likely to be disproportionate, to lay undue stress on something that should be allowed to recede, and would do so if left to memory; and once made they are liable to misinterpretation if used after intervals of time.¹⁷

The concept of *nachträglichkeit* is also relevant to Thomas's descriptions of acts of memory that have not yet been written down, such as the bird's song in 'The Unknown Bird':

I cannot tell
If truly never anything but fair
The days were when he sang, as now they seem. (*CP*, 87)

Thomas makes clear that acts of naming which combine a reference to the past with present knowledge that 'wasn't known then' are inherently belated, separated both from the past referent and from the present context, and often also displacing the thing named, as in the case of the phrase 'women he liked' in 'Bob's Lane', into the margin.

As in the lines from 'The Unknown Bird', Thomas typically expresses *nachträglichkeit* through a shuttling between tenses that express past, present, future and conditional realities in *Matryoshka*-like tangles of subordinate clauses. This has the result of dislocating the names and words he uses from any one context, and also

¹⁵ The alternative definition of translation as a privileged creative activity also implies a process that involves an element of dislocation of the original text.

¹⁶ See the *OED*, XI (1961), 255. Also, the Latin *transfere*, the etymological antecedent of 'translate' consists of *trans-*, 'across', and *ferre*, 'to carry', and holds the meanings 'remove from one person, place or condition to another', 'turn from one language into another' and 'of a cobbler, to make new boots from the remains of (old ones)', presenting translation as a dislocatory act, *OED*, XI, 257, 265-6.

¹⁷ Thomas, *George Borrow: The Man and His Books* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1912), p. 165.

connects these words and temporal realities with each other. 'In Memoriam [Easter 1915]', a poem presented in the form of a commemorative epitaph, is a prime example of this. It reads in full:

The flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood
This Eastertide call into mind the men,
Now far from home, who, with their sweethearts, should
Have gathered them and will do never again. (CP, 173)

In these lines, the tense moves from past to present to conditional to future, and so the flowers are made both to carry a celebratory function and to act as a memorial. In other words, they both mourn the loss of those who 'should have gathered them' and serve as a reminder of them.

in the composing process

[The artist] does not work on himself but on that thing
which escapes him in so many ways, and never belongs to
him until after the event.¹⁸

Pierre Macherey

When the concept of *nachträglichkeit* is applied to the process of drafting a poem, it becomes clear that the act of naming can be further complicated by the rewording of that name in successive drafts, and by the reactions of the writer and, at times, of the reader to those rewordings. Thomas recognises this in his response to feedback on some of his writing from Bottomley. He writes: 'I shall keep your letter by me & reproduce it consciously or unconsciously, literally or in digested form.'¹⁹ These words indicate that Thomas clearly expects and is preparing for a delayed influence on his writing from this feedback. A similar view is implicit in his reference to Jefferies's early methods when composing. In one case, he attributes the poor quality of Jefferies's early work to the fact that 'the [subject-]matter was not yet digested'.²⁰

Evidence of such delay in the composing process can be observed in Woolf's description of Miss La Trobe's attempts at composing a new play in the novel *Between the Acts*. Miss La Trobe's act of composing seems to coincide with a moment when a tree is suddenly 'pelted with starlings'. However, a closer reading reveals the description of this moment as a memory. The starlings' noise does not in fact coincide

¹⁸ *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. by Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 68.

¹⁹ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 202 (22 April 1910). Thomas was writing *Feminine Influence on the Poets* at this time.

²⁰ *Jefferies*, p. 55.

with the onset of the composing process, although a short time after they pelt the tree Miss La Trobe does attempt to compose; but, crucially, this attempt fails: 'What would the first words be? The words escaped her.' The onset of her successful attempt at composing comes later, after a clear division both in time and location, when she has moved indoors to a bar. In the bar, while drinking, she hears the first words of her play. These words coincide with a memory of the starlings' noise. It is, therefore, her memory of the starlings' intervention, not the intervention itself, which heralds and instigates the first words of her new play.

In this novel, delayed interaction between the actual intervention of the natural environment and the creative process occurs not only in composition but in performance. The production of Miss La Trobe's outdoor play is also interrupted by the sounds of nature:

Then the wind rose, and in the rustle of the leaves even the great words became inaudible; and the audience sat staring at the villagers, whose mouths opened, but no sound came.

And the stage was empty. Miss La Trobe leant against the tree, paralyzed. Her power had left her. Beads of perspiration broke on her forehead. Illusion had failed. 'This is death,' she murmured, 'death.'

Then suddenly, as the illusion petered out, the cows took up the burden. One had lost her calf. In the very nick of time she lifted her great moon-eyed head and bellowed.

The cows play the same role as the starlings. They link human language and the sounds of the environment: 'The cows annihilated the gap; bridged the distance; filled the emptiness and continued the emotion.'²¹ They only do this, however, after the wind has already interrupted the human performance. So, although the sounds of nature complete the human actors' lines, this occurs after they have drowned them out in a combative situation that, as noted earlier, contrasts with Thomas's description of the gentle interaction of nature and book in 'Reading out of doors'. Although memory is not in question in this passage from *Between the Acts*, once again temporal delay occurs. The cows only take up the burden, acting like Thomas's 'landscape and the air' that think his thoughts for him, some time after the wind's interruption has rendered the actors 'inaudible', and some time after 'the illusion petered out'.²²

At this point, in order to look more closely at the detail of the process of delayed influence while composing and its effect on a work-in-progress, it is worth examining the documentation of the drafting of *The Drier The Brighter*. The notes

²¹ *Between the Acts*, p. 244, p. 246, p. 248, p. 165, pp. 165-6.

²² Thomas, 'Reading out of doors', *Atlantic Monthly*, 92, p. 276; Woolf, *Between the Acts*, p. 165;

accompanying many of these poems make clear that the influence of initial writing conditions often surface in later drafts, when the initial experience has moved not only to the peripheries of attention but also to the peripheries of memory. The following example of the drafting process of 'Spring Hijack' shows how such intensification of dislocation and of an accompanying intensification of vagueness can result in greater definition, demonstrating how vagueness can be described, in accordance with the Jamesian doctrine, as a definite experience.

As recorded in Chapter One, the first notes for 'Spring Hijack' were written in transit on a bus journey into Herefordshire.²³ Although these notes allude to a sense of seasonal dislocation, 'one of those February mornings /(although it's March)' and a sense of disorientation triggered by movement through a 'countryside turned into car-park', they make no mention of the bus journey. However, in the later drafts of this poem, the original conditions in which it was written become more and more clearly defined. There is more detail of the physical bus journey and also of the dislocation that such a journey incurs. In accordance with *nachträglichkeit*, although the later drafts are written at a stationary computer, the confusions of date and place recorded in these drafts also reflect the dislocation experienced when composing the initial notes on a moving bus. The first computer draft adds the title 'Spring Hijack in Herefordshire'. This includes a more specific reference to place but retains a sense of seasonal dislocation in the word 'hijack'. The title then changes in a later draft to the non-locally specific but still dislocated 'Spring Hijack'. At this point, more detailed references to the original bus journey are also added in the lines:

We drove into the road-riddled countryside
in search of green.

This draft also contains a more precise reference to date, 'Mid-March'. The increase in precision is mirrored in the successive shifts of position of this date as the poem develops. It moves from an opening sentence to an opening line and then to an opening one-line stanza. With each dislocation, the date is emphasised more strongly, and the reference to it also becomes more precise. 'Spring' becomes 'mid-March'. This is then amplified in a further draft with a reference to the previous month, 'February-ish', re-introducing, therefore, an element of dislocation even as the description becomes more exact. A similar trajectory occurs with the description of

²³ See Chapter One, Appendix B.

the countryside. It is first 'road-riddled' and then, in a version written a month later, is further described as having 'no spaces', an urban-seeming car-park.²⁴ In this way, it is both more precisely described and also dislocated from a conventional perception of the countryside as relatively car-free.

According to my notes, when adding the phrase 'no spaces', I was uncertain as to the origin of the initial notes that became this poem. It is only later, after referring to a separate diary of my activities, that I can date and place the composition of the original draft. Previous to this discovery, I had interpreted my choice of 'spaces' in the poem as a reference to the Japanese aesthetic of *ma*, noting that "no spaces" came to me kind of as a joke – no spaces when you want to park but then thought yes it fits so well with the overall theme of *Ma* here.²⁵ This note shows my limited awareness of the dislocatory aspects of my composing processes, and, therefore, also shows that this awareness is itself dislocated from those composing processes. However, the fact that I refer to a joke when attempting to explain my choice of the phrase 'no spaces' also suggests that I did have at that point a limited awareness of dislocation, since temporal dislocation is often an essential element in jokes. As Freud puts it:

Jokes show a special way of behaving too in regard to association. Often they are not at the disposal of our memory when we want them; but at other times, to make up for this, they appear involuntarily, as it were, and at points in our train of thought where we cannot see their relevance.²⁶

So, as the drafts of 'Spring Hijack' progress, the vagueness present in the initial notes is intensified. As a result, the dislocation is more precisely located in language, place and time. Similarly, my explanation for my use of the dislocating phrase 'no spaces' suggests a further element of dislocation is also present in my awareness. This indicates that the activity of refining and articulating one or more points of dislocation relates both to the writer's awareness of the composing process and to the work-in-progress. As the drafts develop, the writer appears to become progressively more aware of elements of dislocation, a process that, in this case, still

²⁴ Kendall, Records, filed under 'Spring Hijack', 1, 7, 29 April 2004, 6 May 2004. See Appendix I. For final version of 'Spring Hijack', see *Brighter*, p. 235.

²⁵ Records, filed under 'Spring Hijack', 6 May 2004.

²⁶ 'The Relation of Jokes to Dreams and the Unconscious', in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. by James Strachey, 15 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990-1993), VI (1991), 216-38 (p. 225). First published in German in 1905. Freud also found that the technical methods used in jokes 'were the same as the means used in the "dream-work"', 'An Autobiographical Study', in *Historical and Expository Works*, p. 250.

continues when I am reviewing the dislocation in these drafts in preparation for writing the thesis.

Temporal dislocation is also likely to occur when a poet names or titles a draft or poem. Such acts of naming are more frequent when writing directly on the computer, as was often the case in the drafting of *The Drier The Brighter*. As I observed, when using the medium of a computer, a writer is required to name any files she opens as soon as she first saves them. In *The Drier The Brighter* documentation, the number of poems dealt with amounts to over sixty. With such large numbers of poems, the names of the files need, for identification purposes, to give an indication of the individual poems or drafts they contain, and cannot simply be a number or a date. The name of the file has to identify in some way the poem that it contains. It takes an effort of will, therefore, not to view the title given to such a file as the title of the poem contained within it. As a result, in effect, the file names serve as provisional poem titles.

However, despite the resultant forced early titling of these poems, the same phenomenon of dissonance between the name and the named as observed in the act of naming in Thomas's 'Bob's Lane' is present. In other words, as poems progress through successive drafts, the content of a number of them alters greatly. This has an effect on a practical level. In order to continue a link between the content of the developing poem and its title, I am obliged, for example, in one case, to change the poem title eight times. Such frequent alteration of content and title can result in the loss of any clear relation between a poem and the file in which it is contained. At times, therefore, it is easy to lose track of which poem a file contains. In a number of cases in *The Drier The Brighter* documentation, the difference between the file name and the content of a file becomes so great that the file title also has to be renamed. Between July 2004 and November 2004, this was the case for a third of *The Drier The Brighter* files worked on. So, even on a pragmatic administrative level, it can be clearly seen how each successive act of renaming results in further displacement of the poem, particularly in cases when a poem is renamed but the file in which it is placed is not.

In the case of initial pencilled notes that later develop into *The Drier The Brighter* poems, dislocation is still present in my lack of recognition of the poems' identity as poems. This is particularly the case when these notes remain untitled for some time and are only recognised as poems or initial drafts of poems in hindsight.

There is, for example, a three-week gap between the first untitled notes and the second titled draft of 'Spring Hijack'. Even once initial drafts are named as poems, their form still remains fluid and easily displaced. A later draft of 'Spring Hijack', despite being included in my records of composing and given a provisional poem title, is accompanied by the note: 'Prose poem or poem?' In addition, in the editing process of *The Drier The Brighter* poems, details of the structure of the poem, particularly in terms of line length and line and stanza breaks, are often changed. It is as if I wish to re-introduce an element of provisionality to the later drafts. A series of three sets of notes on successive drafts of 'Building', for example, record the following comments:

I think this is good but needs playing around with – order obviously

and

Just arranging things neatly in rows helps a lot

This again mostly re and re and re arranging,

and

I mainly changed little things – to def art or no line order – very conscious that line length or no lines at all are the crucial things.

Similarly, of the poem, 'The anchoress', I note that I 'sense that I need to break up the stanzas – each too contained and too staccato'.

So, the extent to which I am able to view the structure as still in process facilitates further drafting, even though I may not be able to judge the effect of any alterations until after they have been accomplished. A poem not yet identified as a poem allows for greater possibilities of alteration. Once fixed and viewed as 'finished', either as a draft or final poem, alterations become more difficult. Also, in these instances of redrafting, dislocation of a draft can result in bringing that draft closer to the unwritten and unfolding pattern it contains, but of which the writer may not yet be fully aware. Viewing the drafts as nearly 'finished' means that the writer is likely to miss some of that pattern.

Writing on paper, as Thomas did, gives the poet the opportunity of leaving a draft completely free of a title for longer periods. At times, Thomas delays titling a poem until it is on the point of completion. However, even then, dislocation between the completed poem and the title is evident. Thomas's final titles, as noted in Chapter Two and Three, often consist of fragments of the first line of the poem. They still, therefore, appear provisional and half-finished, providing editors such as R. G.

Thomas with the justification for further alterations.

Such delay in recognition of a poem as a poem can also be extended to its more public reader. 'The Trumpet' and 'Lights Out', for example, which Thomas wrote in military camp, show marks of attempts to delay public recognition of them as poems. Thomas disguised drafts of these poems by running the lines together, explaining to Farjeon of 'The Trumpet' that 'I have written it with only capitals to mark lines, because people are all around me and I don't want them to know.'²⁷ He also refers to this desire for secrecy in a letter to Bottomley: 'I didn't really mean anyone to know about my verses. I have shown them to a few only. But I was keeping them rather secret.'²⁸ Keeping a poem secret, by alteration or rearrangement of parts within it, whether from others' eyes or from the poet's own, not only facilitates the possibility of further redrafting but reduces the loss concomitant with the final completion of a creative act as documented in 'Bob's Lane' - as does, evidently, the 'unfinish' of a completed work.

Once again, Woolf's 'Anon' can help illustrate this point. As noted earlier, in the opening to 'Anon', Woolf refers to successive time delays between an originating impulse and its linguistic expression as human song. She then refers to further delays before the written word is 'later written down, beautifully, on parchment'. She observes that 'Anon is losing his ambiguity. The present is coming visible. Harrison [a contributor to Holinshed's 1577 *Chronicles*] sees the present against the settled recorded past.'²⁹ In 'Anon', Woolf charts the history of the progression of literature from birdsong to printed text. However, her words are equally applicable to the process of composing an individual poem, which, in a similar way, also results in an increasing distance between the original referent or impulse and the successive drafts produced. The 'fixed' and completed or nearly completed poem is more dislocated from its origins than a fluid or uncertain draft. Paradoxically, the fixed shape and identity of the completed poem is acquired as a result of a similar dislocation, this time both from its origins and from the process of development. When poets delay the poem's recognition as a poem, it not only remains in process but stays closer to its origins. Thomas's emphasis on 'unfinish' in his poetry, therefore, and his preference

²⁷ *Last Four Years*, p. 219, p. 218 (1916); see also the facsimiles facing p. 218 and p. 219.

²⁸ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 253 (21 July 1915); see also Thomas to John Freeman, BL, RP 1791, folio 29 (21 February 1915).

²⁹ 'Anon', p. 382, p. 385.

for a 'slight something absent' in completed work, represent his decision to remain nearer the source and in process. They also indicate his interest in that process.

However, in another sense, the later drafts of a poem also draw nearer its origins. A comment on a draft of *The Drier The Brighter* poem, 'Lines of topography', indicates this. I note: 'As I changed [the line lengths], the superfluity of certain words became clear.'³⁰ The 'superfluity of certain words' in earlier drafts only becomes evident when those words have been discarded or replaced in the later draft. This later draft can then act as a measure by which to judge the earlier versions. This can work in reverse as well, since, at times, the fitness of certain words or line breaks is only discovered once they have been dropped, hence the not infrequent instances in my redrafting process of the re-instatement of what has previously been removed. One such example is my temporary rearrangement of the lines of the title poem of *The Drier The Brighter*. I note that I 'played around with pairing up some trees into shorter lines but decided to leave as is as I like the long thin leaf/tree-shape it produces'.³¹ Thomas's return to a deleted line in his reworking of the 'April / July / Glory' draft into the poem 'July' is another example of this.

Woolf's observations on the history of literature are helpful in this respect. She writes:

A new art comes upon us so surprisingly that we sit silent, recognising before we take the measure. But, while we have a measuring rod handy, our past[, and] a press that at once applies a standard, the Elizabethans had no literature behind them with which to compare the play, and no press to give it speech.³²

The first version of a poem, like 'a new art', has no measure. Judgement of it can only occur when it has become past. This will happen either when it has been succeeded by another draft or simply as a result of temporal dislocation: that is, as a result of the passage of time, as when, for example, Thomas keeps his 'roughly finished' book on Pater 'by me to tone it down for a few weeks'.³³

³⁰ Records, filed under 'Spring Hijack', 8 April 2004; filed under 'Gaudi', Sun October 2003, 20, 22 October 2003; filed under 'Vanity', 7 August 2003; filed under 'beyond topography', 9 September 2004.

³¹ Records, filed under 'CTRACING', 11 December 2002.

³² 'Anon', p. 395.

³³ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 220 (22 March 1912).

Dislocation and Thought

Time like a lake breeze
Touched his face,
All thought left his mind.³⁴

Shinkichi Takahashi

Dislocation in trains of thought is a crucial element in the composing process. It can take the form of interruption of thought processes, or interference in them by a pause in thought, by distraction of the composing poet's attention, or by tangential non-logical sequences of thought. As with temporal dislocation, dislocation of thought can occur both in developing works-in-progress and in completed pieces, and so can affect both the writer and the readers.

stopping thinking

Moment of beauty
full stopped in its track
down the exact time is now
an autumn evening³⁵

Motokiyo Zeami

In the pause of recognition recorded by Woolf in her description of readers sitting silent before a new art, the process of reading is for a moment arrested. The reader, or the writer acting as reader, recognises the art before making a considered judgement of it. As Woolf explains, what is actually being recognised is the pattern or network of response-inviting structures that is embedded in the piece. Only when this pattern has been recognised, can the draft be measured to see how far it matches the pattern it holds.

The importance of this form of dislocation in composing is acknowledged in Impressionist and Post-Impressionist theories of painting, current in Woolf's and Thomas's time and of great influence on Woolf, as revealed by her comment in 1924 on the 1910 Post-Impressionist exhibition: 'In or about December, 1910, human character changed.'³⁶ Lilla Cabot Perry also recalls advice from Monet that resonates

³⁴ 'Time', trans. by Stryk in *Where we are*, p. 168.

³⁵ Iris Elgrichi and Judy Kendall, trans., *Kinuta*, by Motokiyo Zeami (held by the researcher, 1999), (unpublished).

³⁶ 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', in *Collected Essays*, 4 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), I, p. 320.

with Woolf's reference to the need to recognise 'before we take the measure'.³⁷ Perry writes:

I remember his once saying to me: 'When you go out to paint, try to forget what objects you have before you – a tree, a house, a field, or whatever. Merely think, there is a little square of blue, here an oblong of pink, here a streak of yellow, and paint it just as it looks to you, the exact colour and shape[...]'³⁸

Similarly, in 1905, Cézanne is recorded as saying to Emile Bernard: 'we must render the image of what we see, forgetting everything that existed before us.'³⁹

In the early decades of the twentieth century, appreciation of the importance of recognition before judgement develops into an emphasis on multiple ways of seeing. This is evident in Cubist approaches to perspective, in the work of Modernist writers such as Joyce, and in Wittgenstein's later utilisation of the ambiguous duck-rabbit picture, versions of which had been also popular since the turn of the century, as an illustration of aspect perception or interpretive 'seeing as'.⁴⁰

In *The South Country*, Thomas also subscribes to this concept of perception. He refers to the clarity obtained by recognition without judgement, writing:

The eye untroubled by thought sees things like a mirror newly burnished;
at night, for example, the musing can see nothing before him but a mist,
but if he stops thinking quickly the roads, the walls, the trees become
visible. (SC, 253)

Thomas was uneasy about his own tendency to take measure too precipitously, as indicated in his ambivalent references to his 'notebook habit'.⁴¹ He relates this habit to a too great self-consciousness of his readership. In 'How I Began', he records that, in his early days, when writing for public consumption, he 'had in view not the truth but the eyes of elders'.⁴² Such self-consciousness encourages judgement before recognition has taken place, as Thomas makes clear with reference to the activity of composing in an early letter to Helen: 'I even think of how I could describe it [a scene in nature], actually while I gaze! how mean! how ridiculous! what prose fancy!'⁴³

³⁷ Woolf, 'Anon', p. 395.

³⁸ 'Reminiscences of Claude Monet from 1889 to 1909'; cited in Nochlin, 1966, p. 35.

³⁹ John Rewald, ed., *Paul Cezanne: Letters*, trans. by Marguerite Kay (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1976), p. 316 (23 October 1905).

⁴⁰ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, pp. 193-6, p. 197 (Part II, Section 11). As noted in Chapter Two, the duck-rabbit figure can be traced back to the 1900s, and the similar young-old woman figure was first recorded on a postcard in 1888.

⁴¹ Thomas to Walter de la Mare, Bodleian, MS Eng lett c 376, Letters to Walter de la Mare, folio 66 (9 October 1909).

⁴² *The Last Sheaf*, p. 18.

⁴³ *Letters to Helen*, 2000, p. 1 (21 June 1897).

Jeremy Hooker connects the self-consciousness that Thomas identifies in himself with difficulties found in the rhythm of Thomas's prose. Hooker writes: 'Time and again in his prose, self-consciousness breaks in, interrupting its rhythmic movement and concentration. It is at the roots of his problems as a prose writer.'⁴⁴ Thomas himself had a similar view. In 1912, he writes: 'I am only just learning how ill my notes have been making me write by all but destroying such natural rhythm as I have in me. Criticising Pater has helped the discovery.'⁴⁵ So, Thomas believes that self-consciousness brought about by awareness of previous notes on a subject hinders the composing process. It obscures the clarity obtained by recognition without judgement, and interferes with the 'natural rhythm' of a state 'untroubled by thought', as Thomas terms it.

This belief is reflected in Thomas's criticism of other poets. In discussing Coleridge's theories of composition, he introduces the concept of an 'infinite may' of alternatives, in which no one definitive view or judgement predominates.⁴⁶ He criticises Hardy's 'spectatorial position' in 'the increasing abstractness of his style', writing that 'if men and women are performing for the entertainment of a god, Mr. Hardy has a seat.'⁴⁷ His attack on Pater, which, as has been shown, 'helped the discovery' of his own weaknesses as a writer, is based on Pater's 'self-conscious and mechanical' labour of composition and Pater's failure to make room for the indirect non-deliberate influence of 'unknown powers' on his composing.⁴⁸ In typical dislocatory fashion, as Longley observes when she writes that Thomas's criticism, 'unusual in being before the poetic event, survives as its best interpreter', Thomas's focus on the creative processes of others reveals much about his creative processes.⁴⁹ His comments on Coleridge, Hardy and Pater confirm his own growing preference for methods of composing that involve states 'untroubled by thought'.

In contrast to his attack on Pater, and contemporary with it, Thomas singles out W. H. Hudson as one of the best writers of his age, noting that Hudson's writing has given him 'perfect pleasure, with its edge perhaps a little keener for the faintest

⁴⁴ Hooker, pp. 60-61.

⁴⁵ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 220 (22 March 1912).

⁴⁶ *Feminine Influence*, p. 141.

⁴⁷ Review of F. A. Hedgcock's 'Thomas Hardy, Penseur et Artiste', *Saturday Review*, 17 June 1911, cited in *Edward Thomas on Thomas Hardy*, ed. by Trevor Johnson (Cheltenham: Cyder Press, 2002), p. 27, p. 26.

⁴⁸ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 220 (22 March 1912); Thomas, *Pater*, p. 213. For a detailed examination of Thomas's developing writing style, see also Hooker, pp. 56-75.

⁴⁹ *A language*, introduction, p. i.

touch of envy'.⁵⁰ His comments on Hudson's thought processes, therefore, deserve particular attention.

In *The Country*, Thomas discusses Hudson's experience of what Thomas calls a 'noon-day pause' from thought with the use of extensive quotations from an essay by William James.⁵¹ James's essay, as its title 'On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings' indicates, is an investigation of the limits of perception. James suggests, and Thomas implies, that the effect of replacing thought with what Hudson has termed a state of '*suspense and watchfulness*' inevitably involves a focus on the physical senses.⁵² The passage which Thomas lifts from James's essay is in fact a quotation James has himself taken from Hudson's account in *Idle Days in Patagonia* of days in remote solitude in the country, when, as Thomas puts it, 'thought was impossible', and, as Hudson himself describes it, he lived in a state 'of *suspense and watchfulness*'.⁵³ Thomas also includes in *The Country* a reference to James's emphasis on the physical base of such experiences as residing in 'this mysterious sensorial life, with its irrationality'.⁵⁴ James also refers to this physical base earlier in the same essay from which Thomas was quoting, writing: 'The intense interest that life can assume when brought down to the non-thinking level, the level of pure sensorial perception has been beautifully described by a man who *can* write – Mr W. H. Hudson.'⁵⁵

The conclusion both James and Thomas draw is that a focus on the senses or the 'non-thinking level' is a desirable and even necessary part of the composing process. Thomas investigates the effects of such a process in more detail in 'Insomnia'. The insomniac narrator's eventual successful entry into sleep is accompanied by awareness of and focus on sensation: 'Gradually I became conscious of nothing but the moan of trees, the monotonous expressionless robin's song, the slightly aching body.'⁵⁶ This movement into sleep can be seen as an analogy for the process of composition, just as the description of the process of composing in

⁵⁰ Thomas to de la Mare, Bodleian, MS Eng lett c 376, Letters to Walter de la Mare, folio 197 (postmarked 24 June 1913).

⁵¹ *The Country*, p. 28.

⁵² W. H. Hudson, *Idle Days in Patagonia* (London: Chapman & Hall: 1893), p. 216; also cited in William James, 'On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings', in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: and to students on some of life's ideals* (London: Longmans, Green, 1899), pp. 229-64 (p. 262), as well as in Thomas, *The Country*, p. 26. Hudson's emphases.

⁵³ Thomas, *The Country*, p. 26.

⁵⁴ James, cited in *The Country*, p. 27. James continues by emphasising an accompanying alert attention and feeling of happiness: 'this mysterious sensorial life, with its irrationality, if so you like to call it, but its vigilance and its supreme felicity', James, 'On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings', p. 263.

⁵⁵ 'On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings', p. 259. Author's emphasis.

⁵⁶ *The Last Sheaf*, p. 43.

'Insomnia' can be taken as an analogy for falling asleep.

Thomas also refers directly to his own application of sensation to methods of composing in a letter to John Freeman: 'I have a crude plan of turning sensations, etc., straight into prose.'⁵⁷ This 'crude plan' is reflected in the content of a number of Thomas's poems. The thought processes of 'Old Man' revolve around the scent of a herb. 'Digging [1]' opens with the announcement that 'Today I think / Only with scents' (*CP*, 169). The use of the word 'today' as the first word of 'Digging [1]' also indicates the inevitable corollary to an emphasis on the senses, a focus on what is present. Such a focus distracts the mind from past and future eventualities and from issues of purpose, aim and intention. Thomas's awareness of this is demonstrated when he laments that

[the] degree of selfconsciousness beyond the dreams of avarice (which makes me spend hours, when I ought to be reading or enjoying the interlacing flight of 3 kestrels, in thinking out my motives for this or that act or word in the past until I long for sleep).⁵⁸

Thomas's preference for a focus on the physical senses when composing is also evident in his travel notebooks, which he uses extensively as starting-points for his writing. These are full of records of the sounds, smells and sights of nature. The process of composing recorded in 'Insomnia' also emphasises the senses, as is indicated in the reference by the narrator to his 'slightly aching body', and in the description of dawn that precedes the account of the experience of composing, 'when the light began to arrive' in 'the song in the enclosed hush, and the sound of the trees beyond it'.⁵⁹

The documentation accompanying *The Drier The Brighter's* 'absence of birdsong' provides a more detailed and striking example of how focus on the senses can play a part in the composing process. When writing this poem, I decided to focus solely on stimuli in my external environment rather than on logical connections of thought. The first records of these stimuli in the initial draft or notes consist of the effect on the building in which I was writing of noise from the neighbouring road and railway line: 'The trains and traffic start to shake the house.' However, later lines of this draft focus on physical sensations felt on the body:

inside i have a slight constriction round the stomach
slight bent in my chair the stomach fat is folded in on itself

⁵⁷ Cited in R. G. Thomas, 1985, p. 234 (early June 1914).

⁵⁸ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 129 (26 December 1906).

⁵⁹ *The Last Sheaf*, p. 43, pp. 41-2.

the left side of my neck is slightly stiff
above my upper lip there is tingling

As the drafting process continues, the effect of my observation of the external environment and the sensations on my body results in the acquisition in the developing poem of meanings that I did not intend or perceive when writing it.

Comments attached to the second draft, for example, record the belated recognition of a Japanese influence: 'Last line definitely influenced by Matsushima haiku!' Notes on a succeeding draft record the further realisation that the poem now contains coded references to the physicalities involved in the Japanese tradition of ritual suicide.⁶⁰

While I was intent on shifting my focus from thought to the simple act of recording bodily sensations, a taboo subject, of ritual suicide, appears within the poem. It occurs, therefore, as I later observe, 'unbeknownst to me'.⁶¹ It is to be expected that Japanese aesthetics should have an influence on my writing at this time, since this work follows on from my residency in Japan for nearly seven years, a period when I was immersed in the translation of traditional Noh and haiku. However, what is remarkable is that, 'unbeknownst to me', the developing poem turns into a *jisei* or Japanese death poem. In Japan, as noted earlier, a *jisei* sometimes precedes an act of ritual suicide. *Jisei* are also linked to an acute awareness of the environment, as Donald Keene notes in his description of the tradition of valedictory *jisei* composed by Japanese soldier-poets. Even in 'the thick of battle, [they] wrote of the changing beauties of the seasons'.⁶²

My belated discovery of what is present in the poem is made clear in an email to Philip Gross:

'Quietness' [now entitled 'absence of birdsong'], unbeknownst to me whilst writing it initially, refers to the Japanese custom of writing a death poem or haiku - usually just before committing ritual suicide by disembowelling oneself and then having a friend cut off one's head to shorten the agony. Although the relevant bodily references are in the poem, they were there before the idea of 'death poem', (or indeed anything to do with death) arrived in my mind, which it did once I decided to switch from first person 'my ears' etc. to the more neutral 'the ears' etcetc.⁶³

⁶⁰ Records, filed under 'Quietness', 8, 10, 12 February 2004. The last line of 'absence of birdsong' is 'ah quietness!', and, in its entirety, the haiku by haiku master, Matsuo Bashō, reads 'Matsushima /ah, Matsushima! /Matsushima'. In an act of ritual suicide the victim first cuts open his stomach and then he is decapitated by an assistant.

⁶¹ Email Responses, 12 February 2004.

⁶² *Pleasures of Japanese Literature*, p. 61.

⁶³ Email Responses, 12 February 2004.

I only become aware of the presence of the reference to ritual suicide once it is fully articulated within the poem. In other words, it is when I am 'untroubled by thought' that this crucial part of the poem's pattern starts to form. Similarly, it is only when physical sensations 'written' on the body have been transcribed into words that a new reading of them is discovered, the interpretation of them as a 'death' poem. Additionally, this discovery only occurs after a further dislocation, when the switch from the first to the third person in the developing poem allows me to exchange the perspective of writer for that of a more external reader of the poem. This in turn allows me to identify the pattern of the final poem. A poetic idea, and even substantial parts of the poem, can, therefore, emerge without the writer's intent. In such a case, the writer's initial role as transcriber becomes very clear. It is only subsequently that this role changes to that of interpreting and adjusting what has been written, hence the importance of allowing time in the composing process for recognition to occur before judgements are made.

Similar evidence of a state of composition 'untroubled by thought' occurs in the drafting process of the title poem of *The Drier The Brighter*. This poem begins with an observation of falling autumn leaves. By the end of the poem, the subject is more abstract, as indicated by the final line: 'the brilliancy of celibacy'.⁶⁴ My request for feedback on a draft containing this line elicited a series of extremely varied responses. Five of these are as follows:

Richly ambivalent as an ending, and brings me back to read it again and again;

for me the final line still grates: it seems interpretive;

what an intriguing poem. The last line will stay with me;

nah, keep the last line. I sent it as a text to a mate;

and

the last line is too obvious. It's rather like a smack in the face after all that precedes it.⁶⁵

When, in response to one reader, I try to explain the line, and, by implication, the whole poem, I am unable to do so:

⁶⁴ See *Brighter*, p. 262.

⁶⁵ Gross, Email Responses, 16 December 2002. Also, Caplan, 20 September 2004; Randall, 22, 23 September 2004; Dordi, 2 October 2004.

I didn't think [the poem] out as I wrote and never really thought out – it came it conquered it seemed to me to make a non-logical and therefore truer sense. Which makes it difficult to alter! (Unfortunately I seem to be writing my thesis in much the same way..)

Yes it is a celebration or discovery or exploration of celibacy (or renunciation as another reader informed me) but not in any clear logical sense.⁶⁶

Despite its abstract content, my own difficulty in interpreting the line logically makes it clear that the phrase 'the brilliancy of celibacy' was not produced by a process of logical reasoning. It was instead produced, to use James's phrase, at a 'non-thinking level', connected to the physical senses by its association with the previously detailed physical observation of the shapes, movement and 'brilliancy' of colour of falling autumn leaves. The implication is that the strong responses to the 'brilliancy of celibacy' from all readers to whom I sent this poem at least in part result from this shift in focus from senses to thought which obliges the reader to apply the physical description of falling leaves to the concept of celibacy. The dislocating shift itself is, therefore, responsible for the strength of the responses.

Thomas internalises this process of writing from observation of the physical senses in 'Blenheim Oranges'. This poem records movement from a focus on physical sensation to logical thought. Ward notes of the line 'I am something like that' that Thomas's prolonged focus on the physical image of the house results in an unexpected realisation, an almost Joycean epiphany, which, nevertheless, retains a grounding in physical observations (*CP*, 357). As Ward observes, 'the writer seems suddenly to surprise and sober himself with his abrupt recognition that he is himself like the old house he is talking about.'⁶⁷ The shock results from dislocation involved in the application and formation of a metaphor, carrying the qualities of the house across to the writer. It affects the writer as well as the reader.

Thomas's 'Go Now' is another example of such unexpected realisation. The first verse re-enacts the shift from a focus on senses to a disjointed and surprised reawakening into thought processes as the subject moves from a physical description of the experience of rain falling on skin to an expression of the writer's relationship with a woman, the sensation produced by the 'touch of rain' providing a link between the two:

⁶⁶ Kendall to Dordi, Email Responses, 29 September 2004.

⁶⁷ Barker, p. 55.

Like the touch of rain she was
On a man's flesh and hair and eyes
When the joy of walking thus
Has taken him by surprise (*CP*, 303)

Once again, this realisation takes place within the poem and is stimulated by physical sensation, in this case of the experience of rain while on a walk.

So, the different deliberations and disparate perspectives included in 'Blenheim Oranges' and 'Go Now' simultaneously undercut and confirm each other. The words describing the rain in 'Go Now', and the joy resulting from the unexpectedness of its physical touch, also refer to the woman. The writer's perspective on the poem is also affected. The writer writes about the house in 'Blenheim Oranges', but, equally, the house 'writes', or provides information, about the writer.

Thomas works for the inclusion of such surprise for his readers and for himself in his writing. As he indicates in 1904 in a comment to Bottomley that puns 'mystery' with 'mist', even relatively early in his writing life, he showed a preference for a lack of explanation, for unfinishedness and for states of mind 'untroubled by thought' (*SC*, 253), both in the composing process and also in the completed poem: 'It is not for me to be "concise, carven, jewelled", my dear Gordon! Mystery is mine.'⁶⁸ His later description of a state of mind 'untroubled by thought' in 'Mothers and Sons', a state that is experienced, significantly, by a wandering and dislocated traveller, places similar emphasis on the physical:

For the most part I saw nothing and thought of nothing. I was well and warm and pleased by the ring of my shoes upon the rocks of the wild roadways. I was living that deep, beneficent, unconscious life which is what after all we remember with most satisfaction and learn, often too late, to label happiness when the pleasures have all fallen away.⁶⁹

Thomas continues this passage by writing 'I was astonished as perhaps a poet is when he has wrought something lovelier than he knew out of a long silent strife.'⁷⁰ This analogy with the poet's state of mind when composing confirms the connections between a focus on sensations, a state 'untroubled by thought' and a surprised creativity.

⁶⁸ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 61 (6 August 1904).

⁶⁹ 'Mothers and Sons', *Rest and Unrest* (London: Duckworth, 1910), pp. 49-92, (pp. 51-2).

⁷⁰ *Rest*, p. 52.

too much thinking

If he had one great fault as a poet, it was that he always knew, too well indeed, what he was going to write⁷¹

Yone Noguchi

As seen earlier, the lane in 'Bob's Lane is physically destroyed as a result of focus upon it by the farmer. This can be seen, too, as an analogy for what occurs during the process of composing. Thomas discusses the effects of an excessive focus on the composing process in *Feminine Influence*. He writes:

The failure of Drayton's verses directly inspired by his mistress and actually addressed to her, may perhaps be put down to the too great deliberation of his attitude. He was setting out to do what Shakespeare and very few others have done, to make poetry straight out of experience, not merely upon an impulse due to experience. This seems almost to forbid that unconscious ripening of the idea which Keats knew and wished always and exclusively to obey.⁷²

Thomas criticises Drayton's composing process for its lack of temporal dislocation and too great a proximity to its subject. The state of 'great deliberation' is too immediate. There is no provision for Hudson's 'noon-day pause'.⁷³ The reference in this passage in *Feminine Influence* to 'unconscious ripening', and Thomas's frequent denigrations in letters to friends of his excessive self-consciousness, confirm the point made earlier concerning his equation of such self-consciousness with obstruction in the composing process. To avoid such obstruction, therefore, it is necessary to find ways of distancing the writer from the composing process. This occurs, Thomas observes, in other of Drayton's poems, referring to 'the superiority of Drayton's poems which either profess to express another's love or deal artificially with his own'.⁷⁴

When working on his 'literal matter of fact absolutely unrheterical autobiography', *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*, Thomas develops his own method of distancing or dislocating himself as a writer from his composing processes. In order to create a 'noon-day pause' in the manner of Hudson, Thomas practises deliberate restraint from intellectual interference when writing *The Childhood*. Several critics

⁷¹ *English Writings*, II, 117.

⁷² *Feminine Influence*, pp. 101-2.

⁷³ Thomas, *The Country*, p. 28.

⁷⁴ *Feminine Influence*, p. 101.

have observed how this method actively harnesses Thomas's introspective tendencies, a development that soon afterwards comes to a full realisation in his poetry.⁷⁵

Thomas notes of the writing of *The Childhood* that:

I am reconstructing my life from the age of 4 to 16 without using any documents or any other person's recollections. It will depict simply what I know, hardly at all what I think, of myself, without explanations, or interpretations, or inventions. So far I think it [...] is just to record what has not perished. Later on I may get beyond it, but it will become more difficult.⁷⁶

In this work, many events from childhood are recorded, but little narrative guidance is given. In one paragraph, for example, successive sentences begin with simple statements drawn from memory. The openings of these sentences are as follows: 'Swindon was', 'It was', 'My aunt was', 'My uncle was', 'He was' and 'I was'.⁷⁷ The action stays within the past, uninfluenced by the perspective of the present. By these means, Thomas avoids any dislocatory intervention or interference as a result of hindsight, reflection or explanation. However, use of this method also means that he loses some of the enriching effects of *nachträglichkeit*, the evocation of his childhood being to a large extent devoid of any additions made by his present knowledge when writing of 'what wasn't known then'. The result is unsatisfactory. Thomas sees *The Childhood* as 'a very bald thing in which I have not attempted to do more than record facts. No atmosphere, no explanation. Only the typist has read it & it is not a thing I want seen.'⁷⁸ More is needed, Thomas believes, than simple restraint from thinking, and so he abandons both *The Childhood* and this method of writing.

An examination of 'Insomnia' provides further illumination of what is required for a composing process to continue, and what prevents it from doing so.⁷⁹ Thomas's insomniac would-be poet begins composing on 'an impulse due to experience'. However, although his deliberations result in the onset of the composing process, their aim is to allow him to return to sleep. He tries to do this by making his mind a blank and so escaping from awareness of the dawn and the robin's insistent song. His efforts have an unintended effect: 'Gradually I found myself trying to understand this dawn harmony.' Rather than deliberately setting out to compose a poem, he is ambushed

⁷⁵ See, for example, R. G. Thomas, *Portrait*, p. 223.

⁷⁶ Thomas to Freeman, BL, MS RP 1791, Letters to John Freeman, 11 November 1913.

⁷⁷ *The Childhood*, p. 45.

⁷⁸ Thomas to de la Mare, Bodleian, MS Eng lett c 376, Letters to Walter de la Mare, folio 234 (29 May 1914).

⁷⁹ See Chapter One, Appendix C.3.

into a state of mind conducive to such composing. It is only once this has happened that his focus turns to composing a poem - fatally, so it transpires, since, as he becomes more and more intent upon this activity and therefore less and less dislocated from that process, a 'too great deliberation' sets in, which eventually results in the poem's demise. This great deliberation is expressed in verbs of successively increasing strength of determination: 'I vowed', 'to make sure' and 'I was resolved'. Till this point, his effort of thought, focused on composing, has produced the result he intends. However, this does not remain the case. As the effort increases, verbs of strong determination are replaced by stronger verbs of compulsion. These four successive verbs are as follows:

The first line had to be;

nor could I escape from this necessity;

the third and fourth lines, it seemed, were bound to be;

and finally

I was under a very strong compulsion.

The intensity of effort continues to build until, at the point of 'strong compulsion', or concentrated focus, the process suddenly peters out with the words: 'I could do no more; not a line would add itself'. Continuation of fixed focus of thought brings the process to a halt. Although the fixed rhythm of the poem and fixed focus of the poet can be seen to reflect the mechanical rhythm of the apparently automatically-generated robin's song that the poet initially wishes to express in words, this rigidity fails to sustain the poem. Unlike the birdsong, the poem is not generated automatically, and, when it comes close to becoming such a piece, the impetus to compose is lost.

Crucially, however, in 'Insomnia', after the failure of his creative flow, the narrator, 'as a man, if not as an unborn poet', succumbs to sleep. So, ironically, as indicated earlier, the observations Thomas makes of the moment of entry into the creative process are also true of the entry into sleep. Once the narrator has set aside his aim of returning to sleep, and is dislocated from it, he achieves it. The implication is that an element of dislocation or distraction is necessary in order both to initiate the composing process and to enter into sleep. Thomas's narrator goes further than this, attempting to clear his mind completely of thought, but he is not successful and is shown as always having a deliberation in mind. It is implied that this deliberation

obstructs his purpose. However, the points at which the composing process starts to flow and the narrator finally falls asleep coincide with moments when deliberate effort is focussed elsewhere. What is important, therefore, is this ability to turn the deliberation away from the process in question. The poet may not stop thinking *per se*, but, by means of dislocation, he can stop thinking about the process he wishes to initiate or prolong, and, by so doing, will be successful in that purpose.

This account of composing on the borders of sleep in 'Insomnia' inevitably evokes Coleridge's records of composing 'Kubla Khan'. At first sight, it seems that Coleridge's experience is at odds with the evidence presented in Thomas's 'Insomnia', since Coleridge attributes the halt to his creative flow to the distractions created by waking from sleep and the later interruption by a visitor from Porlock. However, one result of these distractions is the final 'Kubla Khan', and, as Elisabeth Schneider has pointed out, this poem's status as a dislocated fragment is in fact integral to it. She observes how, in the first publication of 'Kubla Khan', its full title, 'Kubla Khan: Or a Vision in a Dream', is followed by the subtitle 'Of the Fragment of Kubla Khan' and by a lengthy preface that stresses the interruptions in the process of creating the piece. The words 'Vision in a Dream' and 'Fragment' and the content of the preface all indicate the care Coleridge took both to dislocate the piece and to advertise that dislocation. It can be argued, therefore, that the dislocation or distraction that Coleridge experiences when composing contributes to that composition process. In addition, the consequent diminishing of his own responsibility for 'Kubla Khan' and, by implication, his ownership of it also dislocates him as a writer from it. His success in this intent is confirmed by the work of critics such as Schneider who expose the unreliability of the information in the preface to 'Kubla Khan'.⁸⁰ Thus, as this example shows, dislocation of the writer from his work can play a crucial part in the experience of reading and interpreting that work.

Thomas also indicates the importance of dislocation in the process of composing by making use of it in the structure and titling of a piece. His preference for 'Women he liked' rather than 'Bob's Lane' as a title initially dislodges the focus of the poem from the subject of the lane. In 'Insomnia', the subject of poetic composition is also at a remove from both the title of that essay and a large proportion of its content, which focuses, like the title, on insomnia. The account of the process of

⁸⁰ Schneider, p. 22, also, pp. 16-17, p. 22, pp. 24-7, p. 81, p. 84, pp. 87-8.

composing is squeezed into a few paragraphs near the end. Even in this passage, Thomas does not describe the onset of the composing process directly. Instead, he describes successive distractions of attention. In this way, he re-enacts the unexpectedness and interrupting but invisible force of the onset of the composing process, as well as the dislocation that occurs during that process. The unperceived onset of the process hijacks the narrator, writer and reader, since by this point in the essay, the subject of insomnia seems established as its main focus. However, sustained focus on the subsequent progress of that composing process results in its premature demise. The essay's return to the subject of insomnia at its conclusion, and the narrator's literal movement into sleep at that point, both serve to reinforce the impression of the marginality of the experience of composing to the narrator and to the essay, and also to emphasise the necessity for such experience to remain marginal in order for it to persist. In other words, distraction or dislocation of attention is presented as an essential condition of composing.

distraction

intimations, glimpses, nearly held, tracked almost to their sources.⁸¹

John Lucas

as one can see when one has not the habit of knowing what
one is looking at⁸²

Gertrude Stein

William James, Leon Solomons and Gertrude Stein provide some illuminating explanations for the creative effects of dislocation of attention. While students of James in the 1890s, Solomons and Stein carried out self-experiments in automatic writing at the Harvard Psychological Laboratory.⁸³ Their records are of additional interest to the present thesis, because of Stein's later position as a pivotal figure, as poet, writer and philosopher, in the development of literary Modernism when she was at the centre of a circle of artists and writers living in or visiting Paris, all seeking to develop a fragmented presentation of reality in their writings that paralleled the effects present in Cubist painting. Thomas's similar interest in the effects of dislocated attention on creativity is an indication of the Modernist tendencies in his writing that a

⁸¹ Lucas on Edward Thomas, in Lucas, *Modern English Poetry – From Hardy to Hughes: A critical survey* (London: Batsford, 1986), p. 83.

⁸² *Picasso* (London: Batsford, 1938), p. 18.

⁸³ See Leon M. Solomons and Gertrude Stein, 'Normal Motor Automatism', *Psychological Review*, 3 (1896), 492-512.

number of critics have identified. His interest in dislocated attention also strengthens the significance of the parallels that can be observed between his work and developments in Post-Impressionism.⁸⁴

In order to write automatically, Solomons and Stein record how they had to expend effort not on the production of automatic writing but on the suppression of deliberate writing. They observe that

there is a general tendency to movement from purely sensory stimuli, independent of any conscious motor impulse or volition. This tendency is ordinarily inhibited by the will, but comes out as soon as the attention of the subject is removed. This tendency to stop automatic movements and bring them under the control of the will is very strong. Nothing is more difficult than to allow a movement of which we are conscious to go on of itself.⁸⁵

Their discovery that premeditated writing is easier to achieve than less deliberate writing echoes Thomas's observation to Garnett that 'it is your "simple & direct" phrases that I have to seek for.'⁸⁶

Solomons and Stein isolate this difficulty as follows: 'Our trouble never came from a *failure of reaction*, but from a *functioning of the attention*. It was our inability to take our minds off of the experiment that interfered.'⁸⁷ James pre-empted Solomons and Stein's observation of the effects of too great deliberation in 1890 in *The Principles of Psychology*. He observes that 'the object must change. When it is one of sight, it will actually become invisible; when of hearing, inaudible, - if we attend to it too unmovingly.'⁸⁸ James's use of the word 'unmovingly' is echoed by Solomons and Stein when they note the importance of removing the attention from the activity of automatic writing. They observe that 'these phenomena [of automatic writing] occurred in us whenever the *attention* was removed from certain classes of sensations. Our problem was to get sufficient control of the attention to effect this removal of attention.' They discovered that 'real automatism', as they term the state in which automatic writing occurs, 'comes *whenever the attention is sufficiently distracted*'.⁸⁹ In *The Principles of Psychology*, James also noted the necessity of expending effort when attempting to maintain a degree of inattention. He writes that such a state of

⁸⁴ See Clive Wilmer, 'Edward Thomas: Englishness and Modernity', *PN Review* 138, 59-64; Ward, 'The Solitary Note, ET and Modernism', in Barker, pp. 57-8; also, Briggs, pp. 376-9.

⁸⁵ Solomons and Stein, p. 496.

⁸⁶ *Letters to Garnett*, p. 12 (undated, placed between letters dated 13 February and 30 March 1909).

⁸⁷ Solomons and Stein, p. 502. The authors' emphases are left intact in this and subsequent quotations from this text.

⁸⁸ *Principles*, p. 273.

⁸⁹ Solomons and Stein, pp. 510-11, p.499.

inattention can be achieved by continually shifting the attention from one object to another, so that, while awareness of an object is intensified, it still remains vague and marginal rather than central, and, therefore, the attention avoids the risk of being subject to what James calls the 'lapse into unconsciousness of any too unchanging content'. Solomons and Stein try to achieve such inattention in their practical experiments. It is a difficult and skilful manoeuvre, as their references to the problems involved in achieving 'sufficient control' suggest. They resolve these problems by creating artificial divisions in the attention. This involves requiring the subject of each experiment to attend simultaneously to more than one task. James also refers to this need for a division in the attention when he writes: 'Practice, however, enables us, *with effort*, to attend to a marginal object, whilst keeping the eyes immovable.'⁹⁰ The awareness, he implies, remains focused simultaneously on the central and on the marginal object.

These findings resonate with the experience of Thomas's narrator in 'Insomnia'. The onset of the narrator's composing process is preceded by a period when the attention is turned elsewhere, on trying to sleep. As a result, the process begins unexpectedly. In other words, the narrator's perception of its beginning is delayed. A similar experience is recorded in *The Drier The Brighter* documentation. As observed earlier, in the notes accompanying the drafting of 'Lines of topography', I note that I only recognise the superfluity of certain words after they have been discarded. The process occurs before I am aware of it. This parallels the observation made in Chapter One concerning the ways in which the composing process can be said to begin prior to the poem's emergence in the poet's awareness and on the page.

Awareness after the event is a common phenomenon for Solomons and Stein. They record that 'a very distinct stage in the process of becoming unconscious [i.e. able to write automatically] is where we find the word started before we are conscious of having heard it'.⁹¹ James also notes in a chapter entitled 'Attention' in *The Principles of Psychology* that

I myself find that when I try to simultaneously recite one thing and write another that the beginning of each word or segment of a phrase is what requires the attention. Once started, my pen runs on for a word or two as if by its own momentum.⁹²

⁹⁰ James, *Principles*, p. 296, p. 284. Author's emphasis.

⁹¹ Solomons and Stein, p. 499.

⁹² *Principles*, p. 264.

In a later work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he uses the powerful effect produced by a division in attention to explain the process of religious conversion. His words are also relevant to the process of composing. He writes:

All the while the forces of mere organic ripening within him are going on towards their own prefigured result, and his conscious strainings are letting loose subconscious allies behind the scenes, which in their way work towards rearrangement; and the rearrangement towards which all these deeper forces tend is pretty surely definite, and definitely different from what he consciously conceives and determines.

Too much attention can destroy this delicate balance, as James goes on to observe:

It [the 'mere organic ripening'] may consequently be actually interfered with (*jammed* as it were, like the lost word when we seek too energetically to recall it), by his voluntary effort slanting from the true direction.⁹³

In James's view, 'voluntary effort' is a distraction from this process. In order to continue in a 'true direction', it is necessary to interfere with the interference produced by 'voluntary effort'. This is achieved by dislocating it and so slanting the attention away from its mistaken trajectory - in other words, by hijacking the attention.

A similar hijacking of the attention occurs during the composing process. Its results can be observed in shifts in subject-matter in the completed creative piece, as in the move from insomnia to composing in Thomas's 'Insomnia'. This shift also reflects the way in which that composition process ambushes the narrator, beginning unexpectedly. Another example is the sudden shift in 'Bob's Lane' from the initial subject of 'women he liked' (*CP*, 339) to the naming of that lane.

The detrimental effect of voluntary effort is also applicable to Thomas's attempts to articulate marginal or liminal areas of expression. As the detailed observation of the onset of the process of composing in 'Insomnia' suggests, liminality can only be articulated indirectly. One way of achieving this is to divide the attention, as recorded by Solomons and Stein in their automatic writing experiments.

At this point it is worth revisiting Thomas's 'Beauty', since this poem tracks in detail the process by which such division of attention furthers the poetic flow. In the composing process described in 'Beauty', the sequence of events occurs in reverse order to those recorded in 'Insomnia'. The poet in 'Beauty' initially attempts to compose an epitaph, a song for the dead, in a stationary fixed position and in a state of

⁹³ *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion delivered at Edinburgh in 1901- 1902* (London: Longmans, Green, 1917), p. 209. Author's emphasis.

mind that is not relaxed or flowing but 'tired, angry, and ill at ease' (*CP*, 97). The use of the verb of containment 'frame' to refer to this act of composing emphasises the deliberate attempt to enclose the incipient poem inside known boundaries. This epitaph, however, undergoes its own metaphorical death when the poet abandons this first act of composing, replicating the outcome of the short-lived deliberate composition process of 'Insomnia', except that, in the case of 'Beauty', the poet concurs with, rather than struggles against, the demise of the composing process, and, additionally, once he has set aside this aim of writing a poem and is no longer focusing his attention upon it, the aim is achieved. The poem expresses the processes that occur at this point in the poet's mind with a physical image of divided attention, when the poet records how, having 'wearied' of his composing,

some fraction of me, happily
Floats through the window even now to a tree
Down in the misting, dim-lit, quiet vale (*CP*, 97)

This 'fraction of me' then 'slants unswerving to its home and love' in the vale, outside the enclosed room. It is here that the 'Beauty', which represents an alternative to the poet's initial creative failure, is discovered. The importance of division in the attention when composing is reiterated by the observation that this 'Beauty' is not in the room with the poet, but out 'there':

There I find my rest, as through the dusk air
Flies what yet lives in me: Beauty is there.

Significantly, the demonstrative adverb 'there' both opens and closes this final rhyming couplet. It denotes a distant position from the speaker and so emphasises the division in the poet's attention, part of it still remaining in the room and only a 'fraction' directed towards the vale.

By dividing the attention, the creative process can continue, not lost in too much dislocation nor destroyed by too much concentration; hence, the poet both is and is not involved in his act of creation. This is suggested by Thomas's reference, quoted earlier in this chapter, in a description of an unexpected harmonious natural scene, to being 'astonished as perhaps a poet is when he has wrought something lovelier than he knew out of a long silent strife'.⁹⁴ The poet is surprised by the process of composing in which he has nevertheless participated.

⁹⁴ 'Mothers and Sons', *Rest*, p. 52.

In 1929, Woolf investigates the subtle interplay between composing, inattention, concentration and dislocation in *A Room of One's Own*. She expresses it physically in the words: 'What idea had it been that had sent me so audaciously trespassing [on a lawn in an "Oxbridge" college]'.⁹⁵ The physical dislocation enacted by that movement of inadvertent trespassing reflects the mental dislocation and inattention that accompanies the formation of the new idea. The act of inadvertent trespassing also contributes directly to the formation of that idea by ambushing the attention from it. The writer is absorbed, concentrated and, at the same time, distracted from the walk by the idea and also from the idea by the walk. The attention shifts between the two, so there is no opportunity of focusing for a prolonged period on either.

James refers to such a connection between the movement of the mind and the body when he suggests that the meaningless movements that occur when thinking in transit possibly 'draft off the stimulations that interfere with thought'.⁹⁶ This interpretation is strengthened by the observation made in Chapter One of Thomas's frequent experience of composing while in transit. This physical disorientation of the writer is, in fact, another form of dislocation. For Thomas, even when physically incapacitated, as when he is laid up with an injured ankle, the element of transit is present. His 'The Lofty Sky', written while he is incapacitated from this injury, still indulges in imaginative travel to 'the tops of the high hills' (*CP*, 79). More directly, as noted in Chapter One, Thomas's process of composing his travel and country books typically begins with a walking tour in which he makes notes as he travels, and many of his poems are composed as he climbs up the path to his study or travels home by train from military camps: 'It has perhaps become a really bad habit as I walk up the hill [from his home to his study]'.⁹⁷ As demonstrated in Chapter One, the significance of such conditions for Thomas is indicated by the fact that the only comments he appends to his poems relate to dates of composition, modes of transit, the starting-points, and, more often, the destinations of those journeys.⁹⁸ In addition, he writes poems that allude to the subject of war while still in England. In contrast, when he is

⁹⁵ *A Room of One's Own*, p. 10.

⁹⁶ *Principles*, p. 297.

⁹⁷ *Last Four Years*, p. 127 (25 March 1915). The letter was written from Steep.

⁹⁸ As noted in Chapter One, of the sixty-seven poems in the Bodleian manuscript, the only ones on which Thomas has noted the conditions in which they were written were eleven poems composed in transit. See Bodleian, MS Don d 28, Poems, p. 2, p. 17, p. 20, p. 22, p. 27, p. 32, p. 37, p. 50, p. 60, p. 64, p. 69.

at the Front, and so no longer so physically separated from the action and effects of war, he records that 'I doubt even if I can write – I am practically certain I can't, except a brief diary.'⁹⁹

The Drier The Brighter documentation of my physical situation when composing also reveals a similar connection between inadvertent or apparently irrelevant physical movement and the process of composing. This has already been observed in connection with 'Spring Hijack'. In addition, my efforts to find a rhyme for 'that' in the poem 'Terrible Things' produce a result when 'I am thinking of other things' and am in a literal position of physical dislocation. I note:

I suppose I can at least start thinking of what rhymes with 'that', hmm 'at' – 'are these institutions at?' but it doesn't scan – how would it scan? Does it need a stronger verb than 'are'? I try saying it without the 'are' and 'at' to see what stresses are required and think of 'these institutions are at' – here now on my bike between two places going to do something else – just passed over a railway bridge, along a main road.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, my difficulties in the continuation of the phrase 'ran him over' in the writing of 'Building' are resolved when my attention shifts, my activity changes, and I am again physically in transit. I note:

I sensed that I had run out of habitual responses. My attention had shifted from this task and I became involved in unrelated physical and mental activities (riding a bicycle, admiring the autumn leaves and mentally running over the points of the lecture I was about to give). As I was immersed in these other activities, a verb appeared in my mind that fitted all the criteria.¹⁰¹

The obliquity of the references to grief in *The Drier The Brighter's* 'One Minute's also indicates the need for dislocation and a tangential approach to the subject matter of a poem.

In the case of both 'Terrible Things' and 'Building', the temporal and physical dislocations that result from the transit conditions in which they were composed contribute to the poem's development at a point when that development is hindered or dislocated. Significantly, the difficulties that appear to be addressed by dislocation revolve round words that refer to place, namely the prepositions 'over' and 'at', and solutions to these difficulties are reached when the writer is no longer in one place, but moving, on a bicycle. This seems to point towards the extreme claim that the physical

⁹⁹ *Last Four Years*, p. 246 (31 January 1917).

¹⁰⁰ Records, filed under 'terrible things', 10 September 2003. See Appendix J for the full poem, not included in *The Drier The Brighter* collection because of the poem's dependence on obscure personal references.

¹⁰¹ Draft paper, Records, 'Searching for the Invisible Poem', 15 March 2004.

state of the writer's body relates to the state of her mind, since physical dislocation of the writer, achieved in these two instances by a cycle ride, coincides with a resumption in the movement of the composing process. It is as if this physical movement and transportation of the body has the effect of dislocating the mind from its fixation on prepositions of place. Further documentation of such instances is necessary to substantiate this point. However, the conclusion that can be drawn from these examples in the present thesis is that distractions caused either by writing in transit, or by physically interrupting writing with a movement away from the situation in which it occurs, contribute to the development of the work-in-progress.

tangential awareness and the reader

Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine; - they are the life, the soul of reading! - take them out of this book, for instance, - you might as well take the book along with them.¹⁰²

Laurence Sterne

It was the roundabout and kindly way towards our end,
and so disguised our purpose that we forgot it.¹⁰³

Edward Thomas

Freud writes of his difficulties when researching his own dreams that 'my self-analysis remains interrupted. I have realized why I can analyze myself only with the help of knowledge obtained objectively (like an outsider). True self-analysis is impossible.'¹⁰⁴ He deals with these difficulties by distancing himself from the dream and writing about it 'like an outsider'. By so doing, he dislocates himself as observer from himself as dreamer. Woolf makes a similar observation concerning the way in which dislocation can aid illumination when she notes, in 1940, how dislocating the reader's experience of a piece by means of a 'sidelong approach' allows that piece to evade any censorship imposed on it by the reader. This reader could be an external reader, but could also be the writer herself looking back on earlier work, rather in the manner of Freud when researching his dreams. Woolf writes of how the 'surface manner' of her articles 'allows one, as I have often found, to slip in things that would be inaudible if one marched straight up and spoke out loud'.¹⁰⁵ Another writer who also makes use of the dislocatory effect of a 'sidelong approach' is Coleridge in his

¹⁰² *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1900), I, p. 36 (Book I, Chapter 22).

¹⁰³ *Oxford*, pp. 57-8.

¹⁰⁴ Freud to Fliess, Masson, p. 281 (14 November 1897).

¹⁰⁵ 'A Sketch of the Past', in *Moments of Being*, rev. enl. edn (London: Hogarth Press, 1985), p. 150.

titling of and preface to 'Kubla Khan' and his possible encouragement of what Schneider calls an 'impressionistic approach' to the poem, in which readers 'are apt to read it with but half-conscious attention'.¹⁰⁶ Jack Stillinger comes to a similar conclusion as regards 'Kubla Khan', writing:

It has persuasively been argued that, were it not for this introductory prose, we would never know that the poem was a fragment. The introduction controls our reading from beginning to end: without it, the poetic lines emphasize creativity and inspiration; with the introduction, contrariwise, the lines emphasize the poet's *failure* at creativity.¹⁰⁷

This emphasis on '*failure* at creativity' appears deliberate on Coleridge's part.¹⁰⁸ Stillinger, for example, reads what he calls Coleridge's 'purposeful authorial intertextuality' as resulting from his shift in role from writer to 'critic *and interpreter* of what he had initially created without a plan, and now, in these subsequent pages of writing, *added authorial intention* that was not consciously present in the original composition'.¹⁰⁹ Thomas parodies such shifts of role in *Feminine Influence* when he interprets and qualifies Coleridge's definition of the artist as one who 'must imitate that which is within the thing'. Thomas appears initially to be endorsing this definition by his decision to quote it in a book that deals extensively with the process of composing, but, as noted earlier, he immediately proceeds to destabilise Coleridge's statement by continuing the sentence with a qualification of Coleridge's authoritative 'must' with his own 'infinite may'. In this way, Thomas ensures that readers not only acknowledge but also experience the uncertainty that he is propagating.¹¹⁰

Thomas's admiration for Coleridge is unequivocal. He writes, for example, that *Biographia Literaria* contains 'the most profound literary criticism which has so far been written in English. His [Coleridge's] scattered pages on poetic diction, due to his disagreement with Wordsworth's theory, are all that can at present form the basis of any true criticism of Poetry.'¹¹¹ His use of Coleridge in *Feminine Influence* can, therefore, also be read as a re-enactment of the 'desynonymization' Coleridge himself practises, particularly since the passage from *Biographia Literaria* that Thomas uses in *Feminine Influence* is preceded in Coleridge's work by a reference to the 'process

¹⁰⁶ Schneider, p. 241.

¹⁰⁷ Stillinger, p. 74. Stillinger is referring to Perkins's work on this. See Perkins, pp. 97-108. Stillinger's emphasis.

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, Schneider, pp. 16-17, pp. 22-7; also, Stillinger, p. 74, p. 79, p. 107, p. 111.

¹⁰⁹ Stillinger, p. 111, p. 107. Author's emphases.

¹¹⁰ *Feminine Influence*, p. 141.

¹¹¹ Review of *Biographia Literaria*, 'The First Critic', *Daily Chronicle*, 8 June 1908, p. 3.

of desynonymizing words originally equivalent'.¹¹² In his creative work, Thomas also uses a 'sidelong' or 'desynonymizing' approach, as in his employment of *Matryoshka*-like asides. As noted in Chapter Two, this approach is also evident in his use of the dislocating device of multiple personae, a device that most commonly takes the form of reported speech within reported speech, when narrators in his writings retell the stories told to them previously by characters they have met. This results in a written version of the process of regeneration that occurs in oral literature. It also has the effect of adding further levels of complication to Thomas's pieces, as if he is 'desynonymizing' an apparently simple structure.

One result of the use of a series of reported accounts in his work is to distance Thomas as a writer from the content of his prose. This is also achieved by effects of *nachträglichkeit*, as accounts of what has occurred in the past are told and retold in the present, subject to the vagaries of memory. As observed in Chapter Two, these effects allow for the writer's relation with his or her work as privileged creator to be superseded by a relation that is closer to that of a reader unfamiliar with the work. This dislocation of the writer from the work is necessary for the work's development, and involves, as Woolf notes in 'Anon', temporal distancing of the composer of the piece from the words composed. Thus, in a sense, the writer, as well as the work, can be said to have undergone the effects of *nachträglichkeit*. Woolf relates this phenomenon to other artistic media: 'word conscious; an artist; aware of his medium; that words are not paint, nor music; but have their possibilities; their limitations. To be thus aware the writer must have a past behind him.'¹¹³ Although Woolf is using the word 'past' in the more general sense of a writer's literary printed heritage, her comments are also applicable to the writer's relation to previous written drafts of a particular poem. This need for distance in order to achieve clarity of awareness is also expressed by Thomas in his reference to himself as 'blindfold' when composing. Only during redrafting, when he is dislocated from the original draft by means of the passage of time, and so able to act more as a reader than writer of it, can Thomas, like Woolf's readers with their eyes 'half-shut', gain 'glimpses of what I was passing through as I wrote'.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, II, p. 255.

¹¹³ 'Anon', p. 390.

¹¹⁴ Woolf, *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 October 1917, p. 489; *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 53 (17 March 1904).

Thomas also attains distance from his work by using a pseudonym and referring to himself in the third person when writing about his poetry, as if he is becoming his own external commentator. He writes to de la Mare, for example, that:

I am sending you some verses by a very young poet (not a young man) who desires to remain anonymous except to you & one or two other people. Don't mention them anywhere, as they are to be published (if at all) under a pseudonym. He is coming to town next week & hopes to see you & remains Yours ever E.T.¹¹⁵

In this case, Thomas can be said to be preparing himself to become his own reader by proxy, on receipt of the feedback from de la Mare, his external reader. For such feedback to be of value, the readers, too, need to retain distance from the text. So Thomas makes efforts not to give too much information on the poems he sends, as indicated in a letter to Bottomley: 'I will not instruct you further. I am keen to know just how they [Thomas's poems] come to you.'¹¹⁶

Such tactics are also evident in my extensive use of readers' feedback when discussing *The Drier The Brighter*. Use of this feedback allows me to distance myself from the work and from my composing processes and so enables me to view them more critically. Similarly, my delayed reading of the suicide trope in *The Drier The Brighter* poem, 'absence of birdsong', occurs as a result of distancing myself from the text of the developing poem when I switch from using the first person in that text to using the third person, and so am able to approach the text as an external reader.

Woolf refers to such distancing techniques in 'Anon' when she states that it is the artist's awareness of her material as separate from her that provides her with a measure of it. She points out that this also has a bearing on the critic's relation to the work criticised. The critic, too, needs to distance or dislocate herself from her relation to the work as a reader. Woolf writes: 'To disengage the song from the effect of the audience becomes as time goes on a task for the critic.'¹¹⁷

Thomas's poem 'The Brook' examines the writer's experience of dislocation from a developing work further by including in the poem not only the perspective of an adult narrator but the perspective of a child as a second reader of the scene described. As noted in Chapter Three, the introduction of the child's perspective

¹¹⁵ Bodleian, MS Eng lett c 376, Letters to Walter de la Mare, folio 257 (21 March 1915).

¹¹⁶ *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 248 (c. 21 May 1915).

¹¹⁷ 'Anon', p. 390. Woolf's phrase 'the effect of the audience', alluding to a continuation of the composing process beyond the completed poem, a process that, therefore, involves the reader or audience with the development of that work, evokes Iser's later concept of 'dynamic interaction between text and reader'. See Iser, p. 107 and pp. 163-231.

shatters that of the adult narrator. This narrator's deliberate and considered description of a scene is undercut and irrevocably altered by the child's unself-conscious reaction. In other words, the child's lack of deliberation as she responds to the scene allows for an illumination that evades the attempts of the more self-consciously aware and linguistically articulate adult narrator. The narrator names with deliberation and is detached, 'watching' the child and the scene. Thomas describes him as 'thus beguiled', a description that implies both entertainment in his activity as observer of the scene and deception resulting from that entertainment. In contrast, the child, paddling and in motion, speaks from no motive. Her act of naming is not differentiated from the experience but comes from within it. The effect is very powerful. The narrator's musings on the sound of the running water, the sound of the child paddling, the songs of birds, the silence of a flycatcher, and the awareness of the bodies buried in the nearby barrow are all dislocated by the child's voice, which is both 'raised' and also 'raised the dead' (*CP*, 231). Her words, however, also result in the continuation of the composing process, indicating, once again, the importance of dislocation in this process, since her dislocating interruption provides the adult narrator with the opportunity to share a perspective he could not form on his own. He, however, is able to observe that perspective knowingly in a way that the child herself cannot. So the child brings illumination not for herself but for the narrator, since he is able, unlike her, to observe his act of observation, and to recognise what her voice articulates, as he explains in the last two lines:

And what I felt, yet never should have found
A word for, while I gathered sight and sound. (*CP*, 231)

His facility for great deliberation and his self-consciousness, combined with the dislocation the child's voice provides, results in a further development of perspective in the poem, and also provides a conclusion for that poem in the final lines that encompass all the perspectives tracked so far.

The dislocatory effect of the child's voice distracts from the narrator's attempts to compose and also furthers that composing process. The effect her comments have on the natural scene, raising 'the dead', are reflected in the effect they have on the narrator of the poem. They also re-enact a reader's response to a poem, which can raise or unearth hitherto unrecognised levels of meaning. In the case of the child, her 'unself-consciousness' comes from her total immersion in the scene. Unlike the narrator, she is not trying to articulate it. In the case of an external reader,

detachment from the process of drafting the poem allows an equivalent immersion in the poem. The writer, acutely aware of the need for further amendments, finds this more difficult. This is indicated in 'The Brook' when even the apparent all-knowingness of the adult speaker is undercut by the fact that the final lines are addressed directly to the readers of the poem, who are recognised by the speaker as knowing at least as much as he does.

However, the very difficulty of a writer's position, caught in the effects of past and present knowledge, can also enrich a poem. This is implicitly recognised by Thomas in a letter to Farjeon, in which he makes a connection between his children's book, *Four-and-Twenty Blackbirds*, and his use of the vernacular in his mature poetry, particularly 'Lob'. Immediately before articulating this, he refers to a sense of gradual rejuvenation. The relevant passage in the letter is as follows: 'By the time I am a sergeant I shall be really young I suppose. I wish I had gone on where the Proverbs left off. Probably I never shall, unless "Lob" is the beginning.'¹¹⁸ This passage suggests that he relates his readiness to indulge in ludic experimentation with shifts and dislocation of conventional expectations and adaptations of the vernacular with the acquisition of a more childlike attitude of mind that is also enriched by the dislocatory effects of *nachträglichkeit*, both 'really young' and 'a sergeant'.

Conclusion

Dislocation is a crucial force throughout the composing process, acting as an impetus to develop the poem. This is the case whether it is produced by shifts of attention and the 'time lag' effects of *nachträglichkeit*, the influence of writing conditions and readers' feedback, or the awareness of the present moment and immediate physical sensation. It is as necessary to the composing process as focused self-aware deliberation.

An appropriate summary of the ways in which dislocation can affect the composing process, the poem and the writer can be found in my poem, 'Voice Lag' in its shifting content, text and shape. This poem also provides an example of delayed writing influence in the composing process of the present thesis, since it was written prior to the thesis's inception.¹¹⁹ It was composed in and records my experience of the

¹¹⁸ *Last Four Years*, p. 172 (postmarked 28 November 1915).

¹¹⁹ 'Joy Change' (unpublished master's thesis, Lancaster University, 2001), pp. 60-61. 'Voice Lag' was completed in 2000. See Appendix K.

magnified conditions of physical and temporal dislocation of jet lag on arrival back to my expatriate home in Japan after a visit to my parental home in England. It deals, therefore, with the subjects of temporal and spatial dislocation, and the struggle to communicate despite a nine-hour time difference with a distant country. It also refers to the struggle to express linguistically and spatially on the page the dislocations that occur, whatever medium is used, between myself as speaker in the poem living in one time zone and my listeners in another time zone, and explores, to a degree, the influence that listeners or readers, and the environments in which they listen and read, can bring to bear on the words they hear or see. In the case of 'Voice Lag', the speaker's difficulties in expression and the shifting form of the poem both eventually find resolution when both time and place are aligned in a final centred stanza. This alignment is given further formulation by a description of the physical sensation and physical sense of placing that is related to the act of defecation, an act that orients both the poem and myself, paralleling that orientation in its expulsion and plumb-line drop of dislocated waste.

Appendix I

The last lines of draft of 'Spring Hijack'

Some time soon the air will fill up with white,
and all the grave country roads will be turned to car-park.

No spaces. ¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Kendall, Records, filed under 'Spring Hijack', 6 May 2004.

Appendix J

'Terrible Things'

At the very first round
of his questioner's gun:
when were you at Cambridge
and what have you done?

he stutters excuses,
he wriggles in pain,
as he pins on the label
'lower status' with shame.

Then, defence: he fires back,
watching her justify
the unswerving greatness
of her little 'I'.

What terrible things
these institutions are at
to have made him like this,
to have made her like that. ¹²¹

¹²¹ Kendall, Records, filed under 'terrible things', 10 September 2003.

as for the telephone THREE AM IS WHEN THEY'RE ALL AT TEA ON
THEIR SIDE IT MIGHT BE DUE TO ASTRONOMICAL
TRANSCONTINENTAL COST THE SENSE OF DISTANCE INTENSIFIED
BY VOICE LAG MISSING WORDS WHICH ONE SIDE NOT HEARING
INTERRUPTS.....FOR ME IT IS THE COUGH MY MUM
MAKES ASSURING ME SHE'S FINE WHICH GROWS IN MY STRUGGLE
WITH THE EARLY HOUR TO PNEUMONIC PROPORTIONS

*

But the nearest that I feel
to being anywhere
is when I crouch
over the squat-hole
in the floor
of an old Japanese-style caff,
a long drop beneath,
and me knowing exactly
where I sit.

*

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¹²² Kendall, 'Joy Change', pp. 60-1.

CHAPTER FIVE Divagations

I am going to try and be just about the lines you have marked in 'Pewits', though I am not sure whether you question the form of them or the 'divagations' of the idea, but probably the latter – if only I could hit upon some continuous form as you suggest! I doubt if it will come by direct consideration.¹

Edward Thomas

Chapter Four showed how the jamming effect of a state of 'too great deliberation' when composing can be overcome by the use of dislocatory techniques.² However, in order to complete a poem, such dislocation needs to some extent to be resolved. One way in which this can be done is indicated in my poem 'Voice Lag'. Resolution of temporal and spatial disturbances, resulting from transatlantic travel and alignment in the shifting content and form of the poem, is achieved by emphasis on the physicality of a basic human act. Similarly, just as the physical act of defecation and the accompanying gravitational pull at the end of 'Voice Lag' can counter the destabilising effects of jet lag, so it is possible to counter the uncertainties of absence, unfinishedness and dislocation, in fact, all the aspects that have been covered so far in the composing process, by focus upon physical sensations and movement that occur in the present moment. The result is a resolution of the dislocations that occur during in the composing process. Most often, Thomas achieves this in his poetry by focusing on the movement of thought, of expatiation, which he refers to as 'divagations'.³

The Focus

One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one's eyes.⁴

Ludwig Wittgenstein

As Thomas discovers, tracking 'divagations' in thought requires a sustained and flexible attention. This quality of attention is crucial to the processes of poetic composition. However, to achieve such sustained focus is difficult, particularly since both lack and excess of such focus can cause the composing process to draw to a halt. To achieve and

¹ *Letters to Garnett*, p. 29 (undated letter placed after 21 April 1915 and before 19 January 1917).

² *Feminine Influence*, p. 101.

³ *Letters to Garnett*, p. 29.

⁴ Wittgenstein, p. 50 (Part I, Section 129).

retain the delicate balance of control and flexibility of attention necessary for the composing process to continue to flow, effort and skill are required.

Thomas's development of divagations

while we two walked
Slowly together, paused and started
Again, and sometimes mused, sometimes talked (CP, 319)
Edward Thomas

Previous to his mature poetry, Thomas already showed a propensity for divagations, as is evident in a note to his anthology, *This England*, in which he writes that 'indirect praise is sweeter and more profound'.⁵ He also refers to this propensity in a letter to Frost when criticising an early version of Frost's 'The Road Not Taken'. He writes: 'There. If I say more I shall get into those nooks you think I like.'⁶ Divagations are manifest, too, in Thomas's tendency to use his reviews as an opportunity to refer critically to the work of other writers. When praising Frost's *North of Boston*, for example, he takes the opportunity to criticise 'the old-fashioned pomp and sweetness' and 'the later fashion also of discord and fuss' of other writers.⁷ Even when praising the subjects of a review directly, it is often their propensity to wander that he singles out, just as he rates most highly translations that retain oblique acknowledgement of their source texts. For example, in two separate reviews, he writes:

Messrs Davies and de la Mare alone have penetrated far into the desired kingdom, and that without having been certain of their goal or of their way, or possessing any guide or talisman known to anyone but themselves,

and

part of our pleasure in reading the book has been the belief, in which we are confident, that the writer [Pound] is only just getting under sail, that he will reach we know not where; nor does he, but somewhere far away in the unexplored.⁸

In Thomas's own poems, his words track the multiple possible extensions and reversals of thought processes. This may involve repeating and circling round an idea, and resisting logical or sensory heuristic leaps, qualities that are recognised by critics as characteristic of his work. Longley, for example, names Thomas as a 'master of inversion', listing at length the qualifiers and negatives Thomas uses as he moves through a 'complicating resistance of clauses that begin "Even", "At least", "And yet"'. Smith refers to Thomas's 'labyrinthine syntax' and Thomas himself as looking 'Janus-faced at

⁵ 'Note', *This England*, p. iii; see also *Oxford*, introduction, p. xlv-xlvii; and *Horae Solitariae*, pp. 7-8.

⁶ *Elected Friends: R.F. & E.T.*, p. 63 (13 June 1915).

⁷ 'A Book of the Day: A New Poet', *Daily News*, 22 July 1914, p. 7.

⁸ Review of *Georgian Poetry*, [original publication unknown], 15 January 1913, cited in *A language*, p. 114; review of Pound's *Personae*, 'A New Note in Verse', *Daily Chronicle*, 7 June 1909, p. 3.

every threshold in opposite directions', while Motion describes similar labyrinthine effects as occurring when moods or situations in the poems are 'ambushed and forced into precision by modifiers and conditionals'.⁹

A similar description of such divagations can also be found in Freud's reference to thought processes in dreams. Freud writes of

trains of thought which proceed from more than one centre, but which are not without points of contact; and almost invariably we find, along with a train of thought, its contradictory counterpart, connected with it by the association of contrast.

As has already been noted, it is striking how closely Thomas's deliberate cultivation of his propensity for divagations relates to Freud's method of analysis of thought processes which Freud describes as consisting of 'dropping all the directing ideas which at other times control reflection, directing our attention to a single element of the dream, noting the involuntary thoughts that associate themselves with this element.'¹⁰ The similarities are evident in Thomas's description of his own approach to the writing of *The Childhood*. He writes: 'My object at present is daily to focus on some period and get in all that relates to it, allowing one thing to follow the other that suggested it.'¹¹ Since the period of Thomas's most probable exposure to Freud's ideas, as a result of his period of analysis with Godwin Baynes in 1912 and 1913, coincides with his development of divagations as a writing technique in *The Childhood*, Freud's words can be seen to provide an insight into the purposes behind Thomas's cultivation of his divagations as a means of creative representation that avoids too great deliberation.

mechanical processes

I am but mad north-north-west: when the wind is southerly I
know a hawk from a handsaw.¹²

William Shakespeare

another species, supposedly going about the routine business
of defining its territory.¹³

Richard Mabey

Thomas's divagatory techniques in *The Childhood* involve focused attention combined with careful restraint. This is made clear in his employment of superlatives in the following description of *The Childhood*: '[It is] the briefest quietest carefullest account of

⁹ Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, p. 43; Smith, p. 110, p. 211; Motion, p. 77.

¹⁰ Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. by Brill, p. 196, p. 369.

¹¹ *Last Four Years*, p. 51 (16 December 1913).

¹² *Hamlet* (London: Methuen, 1982), II. 2. 374.

¹³ *Whistling in the Dark: in Pursuit of the Nightingale* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1993), p.7.

virtually everything I can remember up to the age of 8.’¹⁴ The superlatives indicate that Thomas takes each aspect as far as he can. However, his controlled use of divagations is clearly distinct from writing identified by him as suffering from too much control, such as Pater’s ‘self-conscious and mechanical’ work which has ‘nothing in it which was beyond his control’, and what Thomas has referred to as Hardy’s ‘spectatorial position’ as a writer.¹⁵ For Thomas, such writing is inflexible and resistant to change, and is, therefore, counter-productive in a creative sense. He demonstrates this in his account of the process of composing a poem in ‘Insomnia’, which, as shown earlier in the thesis, draws to a halt after a period of mechanical ‘great deliberation’, as expressed by use of modal verbs that carry a sense of compulsion such as ‘had to be’ and ‘was to be’.¹⁶ In order to learn more about the continuation of composing processes, however, it is worth examining such processes of ‘too great deliberation’ further.

In states of ‘too great deliberation’, the barrier to composing appears to lie in too much focus on a subject, resulting in a mechanical recording of it. There is alternatively the possibility of writing with too little focus on a subject - with, in other words, a lack of deliberation. One example of non-deliberate composing frequently referred to by Thomas is the act of birdsong. He stresses how birdsong tends to remain fixed in one form over a long period of time. In ‘Lob’, for example, as noted earlier, he emphasises the pre-linguistic history of the blackbird’s song, predating the English language.

The mechanical processes of thought, identified by Thomas as relating to too much or too little focus on the subject of thought, either due to great deliberation and excessive self-consciousness or to a complete lack of deliberation, are described by James as habitual. James writes:

*habit diminishes the conscious attention with which our acts are performed. [...] habit soon brings it about that each event calls up its own appropriate successor without any alternative offering itself, and without any reference to the conscious will, until at last the whole chain, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, rattles itself off as soon as A occurs, just as if A and the rest of the chain were fused into a continuous stream.*¹⁷

James’s use of the image of a chain to describe habit evokes Thomas’s description of the robin’s song in ‘Insomnia’. The song is identified as habitual, bound, fixed in time, and unchanging. Thomas calls it ‘absolutely monotonous, absolutely expressionless, a chain of little thin notes linked mechanically in a rhythm identical at each repetition’.¹⁸ This

¹⁴ *Last Four Years*, p. 48 (8 December 1913).

¹⁵ *Pater*, p. 213; *Letters to Bottomley*, p. 138 (22 April 1907); *Saturday Review*, 17 June 1911, cited in *Edward Thomas on Thomas Hardy*, p. 27.

¹⁶ *The Last Sheaf*, p. 42.

¹⁷ *Principles*, pp. 74-5. Author’s emphases.

¹⁸ *The Last Sheaf*, p. 41.

example of a complete lack of deliberation is followed in 'Insomnia' by an example of too much deliberation in the narrator's attempt at poetic composition. The similarity between the robin's song and aborted poem is suggested by the similar rigidity of their rhythms. Both song and poem act, therefore, rather in the manner of Caxton's printing press, which Woolf has described as fixing 'the voice of Anon for ever'. In other words, they hinder further development.¹⁹

When Thomas writes on birdsong in his poetry, which he frequently does, he continues to emphasise the qualities highlighted in 'Insomnia', and, in particular, the birds' distance from the content of their song. He suggests, therefore, that the mechanical quality he identifies in birdsong results as much from the birds' limited perception of that song and lack of focused engagement with it as from the song's unchanging rhythms. Birds 'twiddle' and 'repeat' in 'The Green Roads' (*CP*, 343), 'reiterating endlessly' in 'Sedge-Warblers' (*CP*, 213), but, also, the thrush cock sings 'bright irrelevant things' (*CP*, 265) when the dead return from France in 'Roads', and in 'She dotes', the birds are chided

for carelessness
Who see her going loverless
Yet sing and chatter (*CP*, 185)

Similarly, in 'March', the thrushes 'cared not what they sang or screamed' (*CP*, 17), and the 'proverbs untranslatable' (*CP*, 293) of birdsong in '2 Merfyn' are as untranslatable for birds as for humans. In 'The Word', birds sing 'an empty thingless name' (*CP*, 221), and in 'The Unknown Bird', birdsong is empty, intangible and also inaccessible, as when the speaker records how the bird's 'La-la-la! was bodiless sweet' and the bird itself remains 'wandering beyond my shore' (*CP*, 87).

When Thomas uses the phrase 'proverbs untranslatable' in '2 Merfyn', he implies an alienation between the human listener and the singing bird. This alienation is expressed in terms of physical distance in 'The Unknown Bird'. The bird sings high in the trees, the air, or across a lake, far away from its listener. It often sings in places where that listener cannot follow, and its song has an aerial quality about it that distinguishes it from human song. The biological basis of this difference is explained in detail by Hudson in *Idle Days in Patagonia*, written in 1893, from which, as seen earlier, Thomas had already quoted in *The Country*. In a chapter entitled 'Bird Music in South America', Hudson describes birds singing in repetitive 'monotonously melodious voices', a description that resonates with Thomas's own writing on birdsong. Hudson also emphasises the lack of passion in birdsong, writing that 'there is really no suggestion of human feeling in it'. He highlights instead its empty 'airy resonant quality', and, drawing on his knowledge as an

¹⁹ Woolf, 'Anon', p. 384.

ornithologist, he provides physiological reasons for the 'aërial quality [of birds' songs] which makes them differ from all other sounds', such as the highly developed vocal organs, hollow bones and feathers of birds, and the elevation from which they tend to sing. Hudson also stresses the importance of listening to birdsong in its natural environment among sounds such as 'the patter of rain on the forest leaves, the murmur of the wind'.²⁰ He suggests, therefore, that, just as the 'aërial quality' of the sounds produced by the birds is directly affected by the organic make-up of the birds themselves, so their songs inhabit and are enhanced by their environment. This emphasis on sound as inhabiting the birds' physical structure and environment forms a parallel with the processes involved in artistic creations, descriptions of which, as noted earlier, often resort to imagery drawn from activities, such as building and architecture, which focus on the provision of dwellings.

Hudson's explanation shows how, in a physical sense, the sounds emitted by birds have more airiness than those produced by human beings. This explanation is echoed by Thomas, who talks of how 'the bird has admitted a larger air' (SC, 34), and suggests that the powerful effect of birdsong is partly due to the listener's distance from the world that these birds inhabit. As a result, their songs offer a glimpse of what is otherwise beyond the listener's reach. Thomas expresses this as follows:

Beautiful as the notes are for their quality and order, it is their inhumanity that gives them their utmost fascination, the mysterious sense which they bear to us that earth is something more than a human estate, that there are things not human yet of great honour and power in the world. (SC, 34)

The emphasis placed by Thomas on the inaccessibility of birdsong, particularly in his references to his own personal difficulties in engaging with it, has already been noted in Chapter One.²¹ When, in 'Insomnia', the narrator attempts to translate the robin's song into a prose description and then into a poem, his initial stress on the song's mechanical quality, his later failure to reinterpret it as a poem, and his own adoption of fixed rhyme and rhythm in that attempt, all demonstrate his sense of distance from that song. In this passage, Thomas appears to suggest that poetry is also to some degree inaccessible, implying that the responses of those hearing or reading songs or poems are affected by the extent of the singer's or poet's engagement with their work, just as the narrator's difficulty with composing, and his previous reluctance to participate in the experience of dawn, in some senses mirror the robin's relation to his song: 'I was an unwilling note on the instrument; yet I do not know that the robin was less unwilling.'²²

²⁰ *Idle Days in Patagonia*, pp. 150-52, p. 162.

²¹ See Chapter One, p. 34.

²² *The Last Sheaf*, p. 41.

The distancing effect that Thomas attributes to birdsong is also evident in his poem 'Home [2]'. Here, even though the listener 'and the birds that sang' are momentarily and, unusually for Thomas, united, they share not only 'one memory', but also a lack of awareness of or distance from the passage of time: 'they knew no more than I / The day was done' (CP, 177). As noted in Chapter One, in the last stanza of 'Home [2]', the listener's eventual escape from the continual cycle of birdsong occurs when another perspective is introduced. This happens when he perceives a labourer walking past. The labourer, unlike the birds or the listener, is less absorbed in his surroundings, and also more engaged than the 'careless' birds with the sound he makes. In addition, as the description of sawing indicates, he is aware of the passage of time, and so is able to bring his actions to an end, unlike the birds and their listener. The significance of his awareness of time is suggested by the fact that the transition between the listener's absorption in the birds' mindless song to a more detached observation of the labourer working attentively at his craft is in fact marked by an adverb of time, 'then'. In addition, the detailed physical perception of the solitary labourer's movements and particulars of his external environment as he treads his way slowly 'past his dark white cottage front' are all expressed by means of the simple past, which, like the use of 'then', has the effect of attaching the experience firmly to one period of time. The listener's description of birdsong is, in contrast, redolent with the shifting tenses that indicate the hindsight of *nachträglichkeit* rather than a direct focus upon the birdsong:

now it seemed I never could be
And never had been anywhere else;
'Twas home (CP, 177)

The listener, therefore, when with the birds, participates in their absorbed experience of their own song. He is only able to describe it at a later point in time. In contrast, he is more detached in his observation of the labourer and has a more detailed awareness of the labourer's movements and environment at the time they are occurring. This detachment reflects and is reflected in the labourer's own detailed and specific present awareness of his craft as he plies it. It is in fact the labourer's present awareness of his actions that draws the attention of the listener, startling him from his absorption in the birdsong and enabling him to break out of the impasse in which he is caught. The labourer also brings to a halt the ever-revolving cycle of birdsong of the middle stanzas of the poem, in which, as one bird 'ended on the elm / Another had but just begun'. This occurs in the last stanza, when the cycle is replaced and completed with the sound of his sawing:

The sound of sawing rounded all
That silence said. (CP, 177)

These lines emphasise the way that the sound of the labourer's craft begins, ends, and works with the silence that denotes its absence. It comes 'through the silence', shaped by it, and shaping it, as it carves out an end to the birdsong, the day and the poem. Just as the 'sound of sawing' encompasses the silence, so, it is implied, that silence encompasses the poem, forming a setting for the words presented on the page. The implication in these lines is that the labourer's engagement with the sound he makes, and his aware and controlled attention on every movement of his sawing, affect the perceptions of the listener and of the reader of the poem. This attention to every moment, including the beginning and the end of the sound and movement of the sawing, allows the poem, the birds and the listener to move out of the apparently endless cycle of birdsong into a conclusion of silence. In this way, in contrast to the endless and overwhelming absorption in birdsong experienced by the listener, the labourer, through his attentive focus on a particular activity at a fixed period in time, the sawing that 'rounded' the poem, encompasses all perspectives, as the verb 'to round' suggests.

The etymological antecedent of a 'saw' is a saying, a story or saga. This hidden reference in the word 'sawing' in 'Home [2]' to the oral craft of storytelling which depends upon a vivid fluid engagement by the storyteller with the story as he tells it emphasises further the immediate non-mechanical control required by the craft of sawing. It reinforces the implication that, unlike the song of birds, the labourer's 'sawing' represents the equivalent of a flexible creative act.²³ This fits with James's description of a directed specific and flexible attention, which he sets in contrast to chain-like mechanical habit. James writes:

The whole feeling of reality, the whole sting and excitement of our voluntary life, depends on our sense that in it things are *really being decided* from one moment to another, and that it is not the dull rattling off of a chain that was forged innumerable ages ago.²⁴

The birdsong of 'Home [2]' is like the dull rattling chain of habit, and the labourer's sawing can be seen an image and enactment of things that 'are *really being decided*'.

In Thomas's poem 'The Word', the use of 'pure' to describe the 'thrush word' or song is another indication of the differences he discerns between birdsong and human sound (*CP*, 221). Thomas links the purity of the thrush's song with emptiness, describing it as 'an empty thingless name'. He also links it with repetition, as the bird repeats 'over and over again, the pure thrush word' (*CP*, 221). Thomas's use of 'pure' is akin to

²³ Jonathan Bate states that sawing is of 'the same order of sound as the birdsong. "Sawing" is also a word for thrush song', Bate, p. 276. However, apart from the records of 'saw' as present in the names of various birds, such as 'sawbill', which relates to appearance rather than sound, being 'a name applied to various birds with serrated bills', there is no evidence for this in the *OED*. See *OED*, IX (1961), 146.

²⁴ *Principles*, p. 295. Author's emphasis.

Nietzsche's employment of the term. Nietzsche writes: "purity", then, is positively the customary usage', and continues by observing that 'the "impure" is everything else which attracts attention in it. Thus, the *'not-striking'* is that which is pure.'²⁵ Thomas's birdsong is similarly *'not-striking'*. In the 'Brook', he writes, 'I was thus beguiled. / Mellow the blackbird sang and sharp the thrush' (CP, 231), and in 'The Mill-Pond':

Less than the cooing in the alder
Isles of the pool
Sounded (CP, 89)

Even when described as sharp, birdsong blends into and inhabits its environment, beguiling its listeners. In contrast to the mechanical processes such song represents, human voices, such as the child's voice in 'The Brook' and the girl's voice in 'The Mill-Pond', are shown as directed to a particular occasion, and they are *'striking'* in their interruptive and startling effect: they are 'impure' in Nietzsche's terms. They are also exact, specific and focused, or *'striking'*, in their directed attention. Their effect on the speaker in the poem and on the poem itself is similar to the effect of the labourer's sawing in 'Home [2]'. Unlike the mechanical processes of birdsong, the exactness and specificity of human voices and sounds alter the poem's mood and direction, and play a significant part in its completion, shaping it and bringing it to a close.

directed attention

There is nothing to it. You only have to hit the right notes at the right time and the instrument plays itself.²⁶

Johann Sebastian Bach

'The Gypsy' is another Thomas poem that explores the importance of retaining close connections with the land and the effect of this on the process of composing. This poem describes the gypsies as inhabiting their environment by living close to land that has been discarded by modern civilisation, as indicated in the line which describes how their 'vans were drawn up on wastes' (CP, 99). In contrast to the effects of more modern civilisation, these gypsies suggest relative permanence. The gypsy musician's 'glance /Outlasted all the fair, farmer and auctioneer' (CP, 99). Unlike the poet, who is 'like a ghost new-arrived', the gypsy dominates the scene with his sparkling eyes and noisy music. He also has access to perceptions denied to the town-born educated poet, as Thomas implies

²⁵ Sander L. Gilman and others, eds, *Friedrich Nietzsche on rhetoric and language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 27. Nietzsche's emphasis. Part of a series of lectures Nietzsche delivered in 1872-1874.

²⁶ Bach, when complimented on his organ playing, cited in Karl Geiringer, *The Bach Family: Seven Generations of Creative Genius* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1954), p. 145.

elsewhere: 'There were elves in those days; country people saw them, if poets failed.'²⁷ In comparison, modern civilisation with its fairs, sovereigns and Christian religion seems insipid: 'Not even the kneeling ox had eyes like the Romany' (*CP*, 101). One of the gypsies barter with the poet. She prefers to trade with things rather than with money, accepting 'half a pipeful of tobacco' in exchange for her vivid conversation, her 'grace / And impudence in rags' (*CP*, 99).²⁸ The poet's attempts to 'translate to its proper coin/ Gratitude for her grace' are in vain, and the words that issue from his 'dipping' pen are no equivalent for the folksong of the brother, played on the folk-instrument of the mouth-organ, or for the rich vernacular of the sister:

I paid nothing then,
As I pay nothing now with the dipping of my pen
For her brother's music (*CP*, 99)

However, this admitted inadequacy of the written word is, for Thomas, also a mark of its success, since it allows his work to retain an impression of absence. Thomas implies, in fact, that the fullest possible representation in words of the 'grace' of the gypsy will involve failure to represent that grace fully, and this is what he achieves in 'The Gypsy'. He does so by acknowledging the shortcomings of his writing. This allows the gypsy to act as his amanuensis, peopling the landscape for him. As a result of his admission of a shortcoming in his craft of words and his unsparing and honest acknowledgement of the gypsies' creative prowess in conversation and song, the poem that Thomas eventually writes holds its own vigour, drawn from the rhythm of the gypsies' song. Both Lucas and Longley have noted this, referring to its 'dancing measure' and its 'climax of extreme intensity and abandon'.²⁹ The last lines of the poem read:

That night he peopled for me the hollow wooded land,
More dark and wild than stormiest heavens, that I searched and scanned
Like a ghost new-arrived. The gradations of the dark
Were like an underworld of death, but for the spark
In the Gypsy boy's black eyes as he played and stamped his tune,
'Over the hills and far away', and a crescent moon. (*CP*, 101)

The departure implied in the tune of 'Over the hills and far away', which evokes the gypsies' itinerant lifestyle, is combined with the arrival of 'a crescent moon', as if the gypsies move in melodic counterpoint to a lunar or seasonal cycle.

Thomas's tracking of his divagatory thoughts in 'The Gypsy' invites and includes articulation of any doubts and hesitations. As noted earlier, this also occurs in his use of *Matryoshka*-like asides, as in *The South Country*. Often, one of these asides will refer to

²⁷ *The Country*, p. 19.

²⁸ For more detail, see Lucas, 'Plain Speaking and the Language of the Heart', *PN Review* 158, 30.6 (2004), 34-38 (p. 38).

²⁹ Lucas, 'Plain Speaking and the Language of the Heart', p. 38; *Poems and Last Poems*, notes, p. 201.

his shortcomings or restrictions as a writer, while another will counter this either directly or implicitly. However, this phenomenon in the process of composing is not limited to Thomas's use of divagatory techniques. It is striking how frequently admissions of shortcomings in *The Drier The Brighter* documentation, articulated in negative comments, are followed by reverse assessments in subsequent drafts, or even in the same draft. In documentation on *The Drier The Brighter* poem, 'unfamiliar', for example, my initial assessment of the poem is that 'I think it is really awful', but later on the same day I revise this opinion. My awareness of this reversal is evident in the comment: 'How wonderful to move from "really awful" to something that seems pretty good – in 44 minutes!'³⁰

The reason such doubts are so often followed by the reverse sentiments and the relation of this to the continued composing process is revealed in an examination of notes made on *The Drier The Brighter* poem, 'On a Walk'. The initial notes for this poem were written in a field on a hillside in response to sounds in the surrounding environment. These sounds included birdsong, of which I had little scientific knowledge. In my documentation of this process of composing I note how my ignorance of the sounds I record is effectively countered by an exactness of response, in other words, a directed attention which is the diametrical opposite of a compulsive focus that loses track of both the object attended to and of the burgeoning creative composition. I record of the writing of my first draft that

at the time I felt gosh I know nothing about birdsong etc – but writing it out I can see my exact description albeit from a position of semi ignorance, is right because of its exactness – as long as I stay exact it doesn't matter so much what names of things I know or not – so I think anyway.

Re 'open gate' and 'time to go' actually my hearing was right and the horses had moved – therefore slowed and then stopped – of the road onto the meadow one or two fields above me – as I went on down the meadow they slowly walked across the top of theirs – two riders and two horses – but when I looked back seemed to be gaining on me more than their speed warranted – however they were far distance and moving parallel/diagonal rather than towards so no panic, but it made me respect my own hearing! Again if you are exact you can hear/see so much.³¹

Thus, the doubts I express about my knowledge of birdsong and my recording and interpretation of other sounds I hear are dispelled when I realise, through observation, what an exact flexible and aware attention, controlled but not over-controlled, can achieve. The phrase 'as long as I stay exact' describes a flexibility of attention that allows for the tracking of the object in the moment as it moves, whether this be the song of a bird, the movement of horses, or the progression of the poem. In fact, such exactness of attention is aided by ignorance. I cannot rely on previous knowledge, and so do not run

³⁰ 'unfamiliar', Records, filed as 'angel cake', 5 April 2004.

³¹ Records, filed under 'OPENGATE', 16 March 2003. For the final version, see *Brighter*, p. 237.

the risk of letting such knowledge interfere with and possibly misinterpret the sounds I hear. Instead, I am obliged to focus on what I actually perceive in the present moment. In a sense, therefore, what I perceive 'writes' the poem for me.

As noted in earlier chapters, in 'Reading out of doors' Thomas describes the land as acting as an amanuensis for human thoughts, and Woolf's *Between the Acts* describes a situation when the sounds of the wind and bellowing cows take over from human voices, while the documentation *The Drier The Brighter* poem, 'absence of birdsong', shows how the environment, in terms of physical sensations felt on the body while composing the poem, helps to 'write' that poem. In 'On a Walk', too, the song I hear, and my scrupulous notes of this sound, outweigh - and are, therefore, of more importance than - deficiencies in my knowledge of the sounds and names of birdsong. In all these examples, the writer's environment plays a dominant role in the development of the poem. However, this relationship is inverted in Thomas's 'Home [2]' and 'The Gypsy'. In these poems, the craft and song of the labourer and the gypsy act upon the environment. The labourer silences the birdsong and the gypsy 'peopled for' the writer 'the hollow wooded land' (*CP*, 101). Thomas is suggesting, therefore, that the process of composing involves a symbiotic relationship between the environment and the human voice or craft, in which each modulates the other.

In many of the poems quoted above, a temporary period of negativity is accompanied by an exact attention to detail. In *The Drier The Brighter* documentation of 'On a Walk', for example, I doubt my ability to write on birdsong, but later the 'On a Walk' documentation records confidence in my perceptions: 'It made me respect my own hearing!'³² In 'The Gypsy', Thomas questions his powers of articulation, but this negativity is then replaced, as 'The Gypsy' ends with an ecstatic dancing rhythm that evokes the music that is being described.

The effort and discomfort of these initial negative experiences when attempting to compose resonates with Solomons and Stein's comments on automatic writing. As noted in Chapter Four, they observe that the 'tendency to stop automatic movements and bring them under the control of the will is very strong. Nothing is more difficult than to allow a movement of which we are conscious to go on of itself.' However, once successful in their attempts, they also note that 'the first thing to disappear is the feeling of effort.'³³ A similar record of the difficulties of beginning the process of creative writing occurs in Thomas's descriptions of the unpleasant discomfort prior to the onset of the composing process in 'Insomnia'. Just as, when automatic writing begins, Solomons and Stein find

³² Records, filed under 'OPENGATE', 16 March 2003.

³³ Solomons and Stein, p. 496, p. 498.

release from the great effort needed to start that process, so, in 'Insomnia', the effort that occurs prior to composing, although not expended for that purpose, is followed by a release from that effort at the point at which composing activity can be said to begin.

The disconnected switches between positive and negative reactions to a developing poem are mirrored in the poet's quality of attention when composing a poem. While composing requires the exactness of a directed attention, it also involves an attention that undergoes successive breaks in its flow. This is revealed in 'Insomnia'. The onset of the composing process, when the poet's focus switches from attempting to fall asleep to attempting to compose, is marked, significantly, by a paragraph break, a clear indication of disconnection:

But as fast as I made my mind a faintly heaving, shapeless, grey blank, some form or colour appeared; memory or anticipation was at work.

Gradually I found myself trying to understand this dawn harmony. I vowed to remember it and ponder it in the light of day³⁴

The use of the simple past in the phrase 'gradually I found myself', which follows the paragraph break, indicates that creative activity has already started. However, the use of the reflexive form 'found myself' also informs the reader of the narrator's lack of awareness of that initial moment, indicating a break in the flow of attention. In addition, previous to the paragraph break, consciousness was shifting between 'I' and 'memory or anticipation', its focus moving from a 'grey blank' to 'some form or colour' and back. These movements signal further breaks in the flow of attention. The implication is that, however detailed the description of the process of thought may be, breaks in that thought still remain, and the attention, therefore, has to leap continually from one point to the next. This is also observed by Thomas at the conclusion of his essay, 'This England', in a passage that was later to form the basis for his poem, 'The sun used to shine'. As seen in Chapter Three, the lack of words in the breaks between the stanzas in 'The sun used to shine' are crucial to that poem's effect. In the passage that relates to this poem in 'This England', Thomas makes direct reference to his thought processes as a series of disconnected 'strokes' and implies that other conflicting processes are also at work. He writes that 'at one stroke, I thought' and that 'I was deluged, in a second stroke, by another thought, or something that over-powered thought.'³⁵

This disconnected flow of ever-changing divagations involving more than one train of thought or 'something that over-powered thought' clearly differs from the fixed deliberation that brings the composing process in 'Insomnia' rapidly to a halt. These divagations have the reverse effect of instigating or furthering the process of creative

³⁴ See Chapter One, Appendix C.3.

³⁵ 'This England,' in *The Last Sheaf*, pp. 215-21 (p. 221).

composition. However, the associative flow of divagations is also different from that of the smooth flow of words associated with automatic writing.

Automatic writing, while bearing similarities to the process of creative composition, is not identical to it. Thomas indicates the differences between them in his poem, 'The long small room', which includes an image that strongly suggests automatic writing: 'this my right hand // Crawling crab-like over the clean white page' (*CP*, 369). In the report of their automatic writing experiments, Solomons and Stein describe automatic writing in a strikingly similar way when they observe of one subject that 'it is not he but his arm that is doing it.'³⁶ The distinction between this kind of writing and creative composition is indicated in 'The long small room' when the image of 'crab-like' continuous writing activity is followed by a contrasting movement in the verse. Thomas refers to this change in a letter to Farjeon as a 'Japanesy suddenness of ending'. It is marked by a disconnected 'switch' in subject-matter, which contrasts strongly with the 'crab-like' process of automatic writing.

The switch that Thomas is referring to introduces and forms part of the final line of the poem. This line contains the unexpected and powerful image of the willow shedding its last thousand leaves. The importance of this line to the poem is indicated by the fact that Thomas started writing the first draft by working backwards from it.³⁷ However, although crucial to the poem, the image it contains is one that Thomas feared might be too startling for his readers. This is indicated in his reference to a foreign aesthetic in his use of the word 'Japanesy' to refer to the disconnection that heralds, and is also marked by, the line. The word 'Japanesy' also shows Thomas's awareness and acknowledgement of the presence of the Japanese aesthetic of *ma* at this point in the poem.

The last words of 'The long small room', therefore, replace the smooth continuity of the automatic writing produced by a 'crab-like' hand with another form of writing, a flexible and open divagatory tracking of thought complete with sudden unexpected 'Japanesy' 'switches' in subject, and it is no coincidence that it is this more flexible form of writing that Thomas chooses to introduce his final image of 'the hundred last leaves stream upon the willow' (*CP*, 369), the most powerful and creatively vibrant image in the poem.

The sudden switch from a negative to a positive tone in the examples discussed in the previous few pages is often accompanied by a sense of release, intense thrill or even joy. This evokes James's comment in 'On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings' that

³⁶ Solomons and Stein, p. 494. The subject is presumably Solomons, since they conducted these experiments on themselves.

³⁷ For Thomas's account of this, see Farjeon, pp. 221-2 (c. 15-20 November 1916).

emphasises the alert attention and feeling of happiness that accompanies a focus on sensation. In this essay, James writes of 'this mysterious sensorial life, with its irrationality, if so you like to call it but its vigilance and its supreme felicity'.³⁸

Joy is not a word usually associated with Thomas's poetry, but it is present in the delight with which he records the immediacy, after twenty years of not writing and believing he was incapable of writing verse, and the delight with which he records composing poems in his head while climbing the hill to his study: 'I can sometimes hardly wait to light my fire [before writing them down].'³⁹ An experience of joy, combined with surprise, is also expressed in 'Go Now', which traces the relation of this feeling to exact flexible attention on the present and on physical perceptions, focused by and on the touch of rain 'on a man's flesh and hair and eyes' while walking (*CP*, 303). This confirms James's observation in 'On A Certain Blindness in Human Beings' of the relation between the 'sensorial life' and 'vigilance' and 'felicity'.⁴⁰ A similar effect is described by Woolf in *Between the Acts* when she writes of Miss La Trobe's ambitions for her play: 'She wanted to expose them, as it were, to douche them, with present-time reality.'⁴¹ This present alertness contrasts sharply with the trance-like state that is associated with what Solomons and Stein call the 'definite motor reactions unaccompanied by consciousness' - in other words, automatic writing.⁴²

control and flexibility

The flickering, fickle mind, difficult to guard, difficult to control
- the wise person straightens it as a fletcher straightens an
arrow.⁴³

Gautama the Buddha

I don't pretend not to have a regular road and footpath system as
well as doing some trespassing.⁴⁴

Edward Thomas

The flexible present awareness described above suggests an a-hierarchical a-chronological approach to composing that, in Thomas's case, bears relation to the fragmentation of Modernist writers contemporaneous with him. Such writing can be said to come out of a response to the sense of general malaise in a time of dying religion and political and social uncertainty, when in literature, as in other disciplines, old sureties were being questioned

³⁸ 'On A Certain Blindness in Human Beings', p. 263.

³⁹ *Last Four Years*, p.127 (25 March 1915). See also Bottomley, *Welsh Review*, 4.3 (September 1945), p. 172.

⁴⁰ 'On A Certain Blindness in Human Beings', p. 263.

⁴¹ *Between the Acts*, p. 209.

⁴² Solomons and Stein, p. 493.

⁴³ *The Dhammapada*, trans. Narada Thera, 3rd edn (Kuala Lumpur, Buddhist Missionary Society, 1978), p. 35 (Verse 33). Originally spoken about 2500 years ago.

⁴⁴ Thomas to Frost, *Elected Friends: R.F. & E.T.*, p. 63 (13 June 1915).

and found wanting. Thomas's response is well expressed by Smith, who delineates the results of depopulation of rural areas as follows:

A displaced mass, dislocation of the old culture, the restructuring of social life demanded by the town, the decline in real wages and the growth of unemployment during the first decade of the century ushered in an epoch which Thomas described, in a review in the *Daily Chronicle* on 13 January 1908, as 'a centrifugal age, in which principles and aims are numerous, vague, uncertain, confused, and in conflict.'⁴⁵

As if in imitation of the processes involved in composing poetry, Thomas responds to the vagueness, uncertainty, confusion and conflict of this 'centrifugal age' by making positive use of these qualities in the content and form of his poetry.

However, it would be misleading to tie such an aspect of composing too definitively to the conditions of Thomas's time, and Thomas's personal composing habits, since it is clear that such experiences of composing also occur in other writers and in other periods, whatever the quality of the work. An initial indication of this is given by the previous discussion of the drafting processes of *The Drier The Brighter* poems 'unfamiliar', 'On a Walk' and 'absence of birdsong'. It is more plainly evident in the fact that Thomas's references to the uncertainty of a 'centrifugal age' draw on Coleridge's previous discussion of the 'sameness and variety' required in artistic creation. In a passage from *Biographia Literaria*, part of which Thomas quoted in *Feminine Influence*, Coleridge writes:

If in the midst of the variety there be not some fixed object for the attention, the unceasing succession of the variety will prevent the mind from observing the difference of the individual objects; and the only thing remaining will be the succession, which will then produce precisely the same effect as sameness. This we experience when we let the trees or hedges pass before the fixed eye during a rapid movement in a carriage, or, on the other hand, when we suffer a file of soldiers or ranks of men in procession to go on before us without resting the eye on anyone in particular. In order to derive pleasure from the occupation of the mind, the principle of unity must always be present, so that in the midst of the multitude the centripetal force be never suspended, nor the sense be fatigued by the predominance of the centrifugal force. This unity in multitude I have elsewhere stated as the principle of beauty. It is equally the source of pleasure in variety, and in fact a higher term including both.⁴⁶

James's reference to things 'really being decided from one moment to another' also resonates with Coleridge's 'unity in multitude'.⁴⁷ For James, each moment has its particular and individual focus, while being linked to other points in time through continual progression from one moment to another. Thomas is aware of this in his divagations, as he emphasises, in a letter to de la Mare referring to *The Happy-go-lucky*

⁴⁵ Smith, p. 33.

⁴⁶ *Biographia Literaria*, II, p. 262.

⁴⁷ James, *Principles*, p. 295. Author's emphasis.

Morgans, the importance of each element or 'fragment' in a work having its own use, its specific contribution to the work, so that it does not remain as a mere 'shapeless' fragment, but actively shapes that work. Thomas writes:

I should like to know if you think there are cul-de-sacs or broken threads which could be opened out or joined up. I hope it was not a collection of shapeless fragments tho I know they were fragments – a not impossible compromise between a continuous fiction and a Leftaineronish group. However, the point is that I don't want to leave in things that are useless in their place.⁴⁸

Thomas continues the letter to de la Mare with an extraordinary passage that holds within it much of what has been discussed in the thesis so far. In this passage, Thomas amplifies on the qualities he is attempting to avoid in his writing, and so elucidates his intention to create both fragmentation and firmness of shape and form. He writes:

Of course I should like to
know just what you think
useless
incomplete (excessively)
obscure
inconsistent
Has it in places a private
character in a bad sense ,
preventing readers from sharing
my knowledge ,real or pretended?
Does the tendency to be continuous
in the last few chapters (about
Philip) only show up the
//
mass without that tendency?⁴⁹

The list of items to avoid, and in particular the bracketed 'excessively', reflects Thomas's appreciation of a balanced tempered use of 'unfinished' that is not too 'incomplete', of dislocation that is not 'inconsistent', of elliptic and aporetic obliquity and absence that are not 'obscure', and of definite vagueness that does not simply 'show up the mass'. All these qualities are informed by his sensitivity to the need for reader-accessibility. He emphasises that to achieve such accessibility requires care. It is important to steer clear of 'a private character in a bad sense'. It is also necessary to avoid shapelessness when making use of fragments bound loosely together by associative logic. In addition, Thomas is wary of his 'tendency to be continuous'. The balance he is working towards can be seen in the structure of his 'Insomnia' essay. Unlike the mechanical works of its characters, the insomniac narrator and the robin, the essay is loosely-woven. As noted earlier, it appears to stray from its announced topic of insomnia in its devotion near the end to a description

⁴⁸ Bodleian, MS Eng lett c 376, Letters to Walter de la Mare, folio 181 (date of 5 or 12 February 1913 is added in pencil). Thomas gives no explanation of 'Leftaineronish'.

⁴⁹ Bodleian, MS Eng lett c 376, Letters to Walter de la Mare, folio 181. The spaces in this text represent the spacing in the original. For an extract from the original see Chapter Three, Appendix G.1.

of the process of composing a poem that also turns out to be an indirect reference to the processes involved when attempting to fall asleep. So, in much the same way that Thomas's *Matryoshka*-like asides both shift the focus from one topic to another and act as a connection between those topics, the divagations in the essay also refer back to that essay's main subject.

Freud's references to attention that is both 'directed' and 'dropping direction' reflect the emphasis that Thomas places on a balance between control and flexibility.⁵⁰ In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud expresses 'the meeting-point of many trains of thought' in the associative content of a dream, and the multiple interpretations one dream can hold, by drawing on an image from Goethe's *Faust*. This is the image referred to in the introduction to the thesis in connection with Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Woolf's *Orlando*, Shinkichi Takahashi's 'Stitches' and *The Drier The Brighter* poem 'patched work'. It combines elements of constancy and change. By using it, therefore, Freud stresses both the connectedness and shifts in movement that such attention creates. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, he describes

a factory of thought where, as in the Weaver's [Goethe's] masterpiece –

...a thousand threads one treadle throws,
Where fly the shuttles hither and thither,
Unseen the threads are knit together,
And an infinite combination grows.⁵¹

Woolf's exploration of the same image, in her discussion of the associative qualities of the mind, and particularly of memory, begins with a reference to the mind as a patchwork of fragments and hiatuses, 'a perfect rag-bag of odds and ends'. This phrase evokes Yeats's 'foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart', indicating further the common currency of this view of the mind in the early twentieth century.⁵² Woolf writes:

[Nature] has contrived that the whole assortment shall be lightly stitched together by a single thread. Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that. Memory runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither. We know not what comes next, or what follows after. Thus, the most ordinary movement in the world, such as sitting down at a table and pulling the inkstand towards one, may agitate a thousand odd, disconnected fragments, now bright, now dim, hanging and bobbing and dipping and flaunting, like the underlinen of a family of fourteen on a line in a gale of wind. Instead of being a single, downright, bluff piece of work of which no man need feel ashamed, our commonest deeds are set about with a fluttering and flickering of wings, a rising and falling of lights.⁵³

⁵⁰ Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. by Brill, p. 369.

⁵¹ *Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. by Strachey, p. 388. Strachey cites his source as Bayard Taylor's translation. See Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust, A Tragedy: The First Part*, trans. by Bayard Taylor (London: Strahan, 1871), p. 92 (Act I, Scene 4).

⁵² Yeats, 'The Circus Animals Desertion', in *Selected Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1974), p. 202.

⁵³ *Orlando*, pp. 73-4.

The random but seamless movement of Goethe's 'one treadle' but 'a thousand threads' is emphasised by Woolf with the words 'in and out, up and down, hither and thither'. The 'infinite combination' produced by Goethe's 'treadle' is for Woolf not one 'single, downright, bluff piece of work' but disjointed, accompanied by 'a fluttering and flickering of wings', the 'thousand odd, disconnected fragments' of associative links that each movement may 'agitate'.

As noted earlier, this emphasis on disconnected fragments is also echoed in *The Drier The Brighter's* 'patched work', a poem that explores the act of naming. In this poem, a threaded needle links disconnected items together:

her needle ran hither and thither
with no time to cut patterns
sewing whatever was nearest to hand⁵⁴

The link between this 'patched work' image and use of a similar image in lines by Woolf, Freud and Goethe is partly due to the fact that I wrote the poem after reading Woolf's *Orlando* as part of the thesis research and making a deliberate decision to work round her image in the poem. However, as indicated earlier, the Japanese poet Takahashi, a contemporary of Thomas but living in Japan, also makes use of this image in his poem 'Stitches'. This suggests, once again, the specific resonance that this image had at that period, although Lucien Stryk's decision to translate this particular poem and publish it in 1997 again confirms the more general appeal of this image to writers of different periods.⁵⁵

So, the emphasis placed by various writers from different cultures, periods and ability on 'sameness and variety' in composing and related thought processes is an indication of the high importance that both control and flexibility have in this process. Thomas's description of his novel, *The Happy-go-lucky Morgans*, as 'fragments', and Woolf's emphasis on the disjointed quality and the wealth of associations that accompany even the 'pulling of the inkstand towards one', not only serve as indicators of the literary cultural context in which they both write, but of the delicacy of the interplay required between control and flexibility as an aspect of any process of poetic composition.

The difficulty of achieving such delicate interplay can be seen in an examination of the documentation of my poem, 'The Best View'. This poem did not make it into the final *The Drier The Brighter* collection, mainly due to my inability to resolve the inconsistencies in perspective into a shaped whole. An early draft of the poem reads:

⁵⁴ *Brighter*, p. 229.

⁵⁵ 'With that bamboo needle /She knits all space, piece by piece, / Hastily hauling time in.' From 'Stitches', trans. by Stryk, *Where we are*, p. 159.

Choose the child's bed,
hard springs and short,
placed by the nook next to the door
that faces fielded sky
through a frameless square-

field that reaches up the hill,
dark green and light,
and dips into the tiny clouded rill of sky,
trees and hedgerow bulging
from this first floor windowsill.

Reflecting on my initial purposes when writing this in a triple room in a bed and breakfast in the countryside, I note:

My original idea was to show how the view is not from the best bed but the bed you wouldn't choose and how the land takes over from the sky so the sky hardly fits in, fits round the edges of the land – the land invades the sky
[...]
the turn from the door to the window is mirrored in stanza two by the turn from the conventional view of up from water and earth to limitless sky to here a limitless earth nearly and a tiny bit of sky – hence dip.⁵⁶

As readers' feedback soon made clear, these inversions of perspective do not work. The shifts are disordered and confused, with no clear rationale. The perspective switches in one sentence from the bed to the window, up the hill to the sky, and then returns, without apparent reason, to the window. The disorienting effect of this is compounded by misplaced adjectives, and by an apparently purposeless use of enjambment and stanza break. Philip Gross, for example, observes of an early draft of the poem:

You are making us shift our viewpoint round a little. We look at the door, and immediately have to 'be' the door 'that faces' the window. The word 'dips' (when our gaze is travelling up the hillside) puzzles me a little, to the extent of wondering whether there's a reflection I'm looking at somehow - maybe a literal rill. And in what sense the things seen through the window are 'bulging / from' (not towards) detains me now, as well. [...] I feel tantalisingly close to 'getting' it, as if you might just point out the obvious angle of access that I've missed.⁵⁷

I respond to this feedback by working for more consistency. I reduce the number of shifts in perspective, break the text into two definite halves by combining the stanza break with a fullstop, and align the adjectives, punctuation and the stanza break with the perspectival shifts so as to 'sort out the dipping and bulging queries and the change in perspective of ["]choose["] to ["]bed["] facing'. A series of redrafts results in lines that

⁵⁶ Records, filed under 'HILLFARM', 15 July 2003, written by hand at Ledbury festival ten days previously; Records, 30 August 2003. For a digital version of this poem, see Earnshaw, www.shu.ac.uk/schools/cs/teaching/sle/earnshaw/gallery/.

⁵⁷ Kendall from Philip Gross, Email Responses, filed under 'The Best View', 16 July 2003.

include the windowsill only indirectly, as an adjective. The growth of the trees and hedgerows is also assimilated with the green of the field, and a dividing 'door jamb' is used as a replacement for the previous enjambment:

The child's bed,
hard springs and short,
is shoved against the door jamb.

It faces a window-sill base line
of frameless green which reaches lightly up the hill,
dipping in trees and hedgerows
till it bulges over into the tiny clouded rill of sky.⁵⁸

However, changing the position of 'bulging' so that it relates to the green and not the hedgerow dilutes the sense of inverted perspectives. In addition, the division into two stanzas and two sentences, while producing clarity, reduces the sense of confusion that an actual experience of perspective change might bring, as does the unintentional pun on 'door jamb', which not only marks the frame of the door but also the frame of the stanza. These changes give too many indicators of the structure of the poem. They also, however, facilitate a reader's access to the poem, so much so in this case that it was a reader, Martin Randall, who first recognised the unintentional pun of 'jamb'. I had not noticed it. Nevertheless, these indications of the structure of the poem, while they might make the poem easier for a reader to approach, also reduce the possibility of subtler levels of interpretation. It is mainly the over-simplification of the structure and content of this poem that cause me to eliminate it from *The Drier The Brighter*.

To achieve the right balance in giving sufficient but not too much access to a poem's structure is a difficult and delicate task, best achieved through continual readjustments of attention rather than the unmoving attention that James warns against and that this later draft of 'The Best View' employs.⁵⁹ The digital version of 'The Best View' is more effective than its printed cousin for this very reason.⁶⁰ The facility of access provided by the words is countered by their positioning in one small corner of the screen, easily missed, particularly since the viewer cannot see that part of the screen unless she readjusts the borders of what is visible to her, and because, once she finds that part, other parts are no longer visible, so the adjustments need to continue.

⁵⁸ Kendall, Records, filed under 'The Best View', 16 July 2003; filed under 'best view', drafts dated 15 July 2003 and 10 March 2005.

⁵⁹ See *Principles*, p. 273.

⁶⁰ See www.shu.ac.uk/schools/cs/teaching/sle/earnshaw/gallery/.

The Frame

The need that a picture exist in its frame, remain in its frame was over. A picture remaining in its frame was a thing that had always existed and now pictures commenced to want to leave their frames and this also created the necessity for cubism.⁶¹

Gertrude Stein

like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off.⁶²

Ludwig Wittgenstein

The continual adjustments demanded in the viewing of digital poetry bear a resemblance to the techniques and content of the art forms in Thomas's time, as in the work of the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists and generally in Modernist experimentation. Thomas's development of 'divagations' also involves continual readjustments in attention that result in shifting perceptions of the framework within which a developing poem is set. In both Thomas's work and in digital poetry, the alteration of perception of what comprises the framework of a poem is reflected in new perceptions of its location, whether on the page or the screen. In addition, what constitutes the poem is also thrown into question.

beating the bounds

As he listened,
Mindlessly,
The eavesdrops entered him.⁶³

Zenji Dogen

A process of continual readjustment is at the heart of Thomas's use of divagations. This is particularly evident when he makes use of repetition in his poetry, and so tests the limits, not only of intellectual penetration and thinking, but also of language. In his discussion of the repetition of 'day' in 'Some day I shall think this is a happy day' (*CP*, 247) in Thomas's 'October', Ward interprets such use of repetition in terms of beating the bounds. He writes:

To repeat is to return and find it surviving.

I take it that these repeats express the finitude of a man's reaching and accepting the bounds of his own thinking, in a way analogous to repeat-phrases like 'a sociology of sociology' and 'the meaning of meaning' in more explicit disciplines. A barrier in intellectual penetration is reached so that, with nothing further to add, we start using the same words again, as though

⁶¹ *Picasso*, p. 12.

⁶² Wittgenstein, p. 45 (Part I, Section 103).

⁶³ Untitled haiku, trans. by Stryk, *Where we are*, p. 140. Dogen was a thirteenth century Japanese Zen teacher and monk.

someone were to bump into an invisible perspex frame and begin to notice the doubling-up of his or her own footprints.⁶⁴

A similar 'doubling-up' occurs in Thomas's meditations on plant names in 'Old Man'.⁶⁵ The first lines of 'Old Man' appear to move on from a citation of different names of a plant only to return to those names:

Old Man, or Lad's-love, - in the name there's nothing
To one that knows not Lad's-love, or Old Man (*CP*, 19).

In his repetitions, Thomas beats the bounds of humanly achievable knowledge and articulation, of what can be said and of what poetry can say. These repetitions also extend the boundaries of language, each repetition contributing to a reinterpretation and redefinition of what has been previously said, and so demonstrating the shifting quality of the boundaries established by previous statements. The second use of 'day' in 'October', for example, is distinct from the first, and yet they both inform each other (*CP*, 247). The vague 'some day', located at some point in the future, is contrasted with the more specific 'happy day' of the present, and 'happy day' is only considered 'happy' in hindsight. The altered position and context of each repeated word provides a perspective from which to view its neighbour. The implication is that neither perspective alone is sufficient. The parts of the poem mutually qualify each other.

This continual redefining of the bounds of Thomas's divagations is not limited to instances of repetition. It is also found in the multiple rhythms of the metre, as noted by Longley when she observes how Thomas transforms and complicates 'traditional metres by feeding them the roughage of speech'.⁶⁶ Thomas's predilection for *Matryoshka*-like asides has a similar effect. An aside couched in the last line of his 'Out in the dark' inverts the subject-matter of the whole poem so that it shifts from focusing on fear of the dark to focusing on love of the dark:

How weak and little is the light,
All the universe of sight,
Love and delight,
Before the might,
If you love it not, of night. (*CP*, 375)

In addition, in 'Out in the dark', not only is what Ward terms the 'invisible perspex frame' shown to be shifting and inconstant, but so is the area it frames.

The result of this multiple use of perspectives is a blurring of exact boundaries of meaning. The repetition of 'day' in 'October' measures each particular reference to the

⁶⁴ Barker, pp. 57-8.

⁶⁵ See 'Twas he first called the Hog's Back the Hog's Back' in 'Lob', (*CP*, 163). The effect of this line and also the repeated plants names of 'Old Man' are discussed in Chapter Two, pp. 87-8.

⁶⁶ Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, p. 26.

word against other references to it so that they affect each other. This also occurs when the boundaries of what is framed are shifted. In 'Beauty', for example, the area that is focussed upon shifts during the course of the poem from the room inside to the valley outside, representing two attempts at composition. One of these is successful and one not, but both appear within the final poem, which itself represents a third attempt at composition, its title a repetition of the name of the 'poem' found in the valley. Boundaries are, therefore, no longer definite, evoking once again the effects of the Japanese device of the *kakekotoba*.

Just as the exact sawing of the labourer in 'Home [2]' 'rounded' the silence and, therefore, also the poem contained within and as part of that silence, and just as the sharp awareness of the narrator's final lines in 'The Brook' encompasses the perspectives of both child and adult narrator covered within that poem and the reader's awareness of those perspectives, so, paradoxically, the blurring of boundaries discussed above is only effective if accompanied by exactness. The attempt at inverting frames in my early draft of 'The Best View' is not successful because the frame is inverted too often. As a result, no firm points of reference are provided, and the draft is unbalanced. The digital version of this poem remedies this by enforcing a particular focus upon the viewer. This is achieved by limiting the area of the screen visible to the viewer at any one time. The importance of retaining an element of exactness in a fixed point of reference can also be observed in the documentation of the collaborative process of digitalising 'On I Tow'.⁶⁷ When working on the digital images for this poem, Steven Earnshaw writes to me that 'I spent ages with moving text, but realised it wasn't working because basically the way the text is organised forces a constant movement from the reader, back and forth between the two versions, i.e. it's already moving.'⁶⁸ Too much movement becomes problematic. In contrast, Philip Gross's comments on a physical description of the body near the end of the spaced poem, 'Fraught', show the powerful stabilising effect of an accurate exactness. The lines read:

the itch dancing to unheard music
on what was once my fontanelle⁶⁹

Gross writes of these lines that they provide 'a touching and accurate-feeling reference, placed nicely to help the visual bulk of the poem move back into balance'.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ For the page version of 'On I Tow', see *Brighter*, p. 244. For the digital versions of 'On I Tow' and 'The Best View', see www.shu.ac.uk/schools/cs/teaching/sle/earnshaw/gallery/.

⁶⁸ Email on Web Poetry, 7 November 2003.

⁶⁹ See *Brighter*, p. 253.

⁷⁰ Email Responses, 10 December 2003.

Continual readjustments of perspective indicate the potential for further readjustments beyond those directly accessible to the writer. When successful, therefore, the result of inversions of perspective or shifts in frames of reference give a sense of bounds being beaten from without as much as from within. Thomas articulates this in 'Out in the dark' when he writes that 'the dark haunts round' the speaker (*CP*, 375). More explicitly, in 1903, he writes in *Oxford*, as follows:

Underneath the shrubs the gloom is a presence. The interlacing branches are as the bars of its cage. You watch and watch – like children who have found the lion's cage, but the lion invisible – until gradually, pleased and still awed, you see that the caged thing is – nothingness, in all its shadowy pomp and immeasurable power. Seated there, you could swear that the darkness was moving about, treading the boundaries.⁷¹

The content of the dark, which he deliberately resists naming, is invisible. It consists of unperceived and unarticulated areas of 'nothingness', and its boundaries are framed by the areas that the writer and reader can perceive.

enveloping perspectives

the subject advances into utterance through certain precautions, repetitions, delays, and instances whose final volume (we can no longer speak of a simple line of words) turns the subject, precisely, into a great envelope empty of speech⁷²

Roland Barthes

Thomas's interest in inverting boundaries is accompanied by an express distrust of the single perspective. In 1901, he writes:

Everyone must have noticed, standing on the shore, when the sun or the moon is over the sea, how the highway of light on the water comes right to his feet, and how those on the right and on the left seem not to be sharing his pleasure, but to be in darkness.⁷³

This appears to be a rewording of James's reference to the value of multiple perspectives in 'On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings', from which, as seen in Chapter Four, Thomas later quotes a substantial passage in *The Country*. In 'On a Certain Blindness', James writes:

Neither the whole of truth nor the whole of good is revealed to any single observer, although each observer gains a partial superiority of insight from the peculiar position in which he stands. Even prisons and sick-rooms have their special revelations.⁷⁴

⁷¹ *Oxford*, pp. 146-7.

⁷² *Empire of Signs*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983), p. 7.

⁷³ 'The Lyric Muse', *Daily Chronicle*, 27 August 1901, p. 3.

⁷⁴ The concluding words of 'On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings', p. 264.

Thomas sets such observations in the context of his time, observing, for example, in *Pater* that

men understand now the impossibility of speaking aloud all that is within them, and if they do not speak it, they cannot write as they speak. The most they can do is write as they would speak in a less solitary world. A man cannot say all that is in his heart to a woman or another man. The waters are too deep between us. We have not the confidence in what is within us, nor in our voices. Any man talking to the deaf or in darkness will leave unsaid things which he could say were he not compelled to shout, or were it light.

Previous to this passage, Thomas makes reference in *Pater* to a discussion conducted by John Earle on the effect of newspapers on prose. In a passage that bears comparison with Woolf's description of the fatal effect of Caxton's printing press in 'Anon', Thomas suggests that the wider newspaper audience has the effect of superficialising prose, and of limiting the extent to which the writer can 'say all that is in his heart'. This is reinforced in his subsequent reference to the possibility of a more select audience of 'one or two', a limited few 'who can enter that solitude and converse with him' of all that is within.⁷⁵ The reference to the effect of newspapers on prose also sets Thomas's observations in the context of his time, in which the audience for books was increasing rapidly, as indicated in the popular series of biographies and country books to which Thomas himself contributed several volumes.⁷⁶ This sense of a wider and more diverse audience relates to Thomas's readiness to explore multiple perspectives. In addition, his use in his writing of the images of a sea shore and an isolated man's mind when discussing perspective suggests that, for him, the limitations that result from a single perspective relate to physical as well as mental perceptions.

Thomas's preference for multiple perspectives as a means of representation resonates with contemporary Post-Impressionist extensions of Impressionist ways of seeing to confluences in the realm of time, abolitions of traditional and presentations of multiple perspectives. This tendency results in an enveloping blurred image of the subject as is indicated in Paul Cézanne's advocacy to Emile Bernard in 1905 to 'draw; but it is the reflection which envelops; light, through the general reflection, is the envelope' is apposite here.⁷⁷ As Joyce Medina describes it, Cézanne's approach is an effacement of 'the hard distinctions between inside and outside'. She writes of Cézanne's still-life objects that,

by drawing the oscillating ellipses of the rims with multiple contours, he blurred the exact boundary between the object and the space surrounding it.

⁷⁵ *Pater*, p. 208; see pp. 206-8, p. 208.

⁷⁶ For example, *Lafcadio Hearn* in Constable's *Modern Biographies Series*; *Keats* in Jack's *The People's Books*; and *A Literary Pilgrim in England* in Jonathan Cape's *The Traveller's Library*.

⁷⁷ Rewald, p. 316 (1905).

Thus, within the 'halo' of outlinings, a shape emerged from, and at the same time merged with, the spatial envelope in which it was in flux.⁷⁸

There is no record of Thomas's direct contact with Cézanne's work, but there are evident parallels in Thomas's blurring of linguistic and semantic boundaries by means of the 'oscillating ellipses' of his divagations.

Cézanne's 'envelope' foreshadows Woolf's strikingly similar use of this image in 1919 in a discussion of different approaches to novel-writing in 'Modern Fiction'. She observes that: 'life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.'⁷⁹ The context of this envelope image, set against a chain-like 'series of gig-lamps' that is reminiscent of James's and Thomas's chain of habitual attention, suggests that the envelope represents the same flexibility of directed attention already identified in this thesis in Freud's analysis of dream-work, James's analysis of thought processes and Thomas's writings on poetic composition. Cézanne's reference to the importance of the unfinished quality of such an 'envelope' approach to composition encourages further parallels. He reiterates this in another letter to Bernard, also in 1905:

Now, being old, nearly 70 years, the sensations of colour, which give the light, are for me the reason for the abstractions which do not allow me to cover my canvas entirely nor to pursue the delimitation of the objects where their points of contact are fine and delicate; from which it results that my image or picture is incomplete.⁸⁰

The very blurring unfinished quality of the picture results in what Cézanne perceives as a more accurate and fuller rendering.

Thomas's poem 'The Watchers', as indicated in the use of the plural in its title, provides one example of his own use of multiple perspectives. In 'The Watchers', these are represented as perspectival shifts between multiple viewers. The man who watches his horse down in the water is watched by a watcher, himself watched by the eye of a stuffed fish in the inn. At the start of the poem, the perspective of a conventional external narrator appears to be introduced as the dominant view in the poem. This, however, is soon undercut by a series of shifting perspectives, which are triggered in the fourth line by the word 'watching'. From this point on, the poem abandons that first external viewpoint and never returns to it, leaving it hanging and undermined.

'The Watchers', however, stands in contrast to most of Thomas's poems, which do not allow for the establishment of one authoritative point of view, and, significantly, Thomas chooses not to include it in his 1917 collection. Most of Thomas's poems either

⁷⁸ *Cézanne and Modernism: The Poetics of Painting* (New York: State 1995), p. 105.

⁷⁹ 'Modern Fiction', in *Collected Essays*, 4 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), II, 106.

⁸⁰ Rewald, p. 316 (23 October 1905).

avoid adopting a privileged 'external' narratorial position, or, often undermine such positions even as they are apparently adopted. As a result, either the poem, or, more subtly, to refer back to Thomas's description of what is not perceptible in 'Oxford', 'the invisible dark' ground not covered by the poem acts as the point of reference for the various exploratory journeys that occur. As Smith puts it when writing on Thomas's poem 'Fifty Faggots', 'the speaker here occupies no privileged position outside the narrative. Rather he is situated within it, aware that he shares this situation with other creatures.'⁸¹ Another example of Thomas's use of multiple perspectives in his poetry occurs in 'Thaw', which contains dizzyingly complicated perspectival shifts from the writer to the birds and back and from spring to winter to spring.⁸² The 'speculating rooks' see 'from elm-tops, delicate as flower of grass, / What we below could not see, Winter pass' (CP, 289). Neither in 'Fifty Faggots' nor in 'Thaw' does one perspective dominate. The perspectives included all affect each other. It becomes impossible to disentangle them.

Thomas also makes use of multiple perspectives in complicated textures of tense as noted in, for example, the earlier discussion of the effects of naming in 'Bob's Lane'. This is also evident in the tenses he uses to portray the narrator's overwhelming absorption in birdsong in 'Home [2]'. Multiple perspectives occur, too, in his presentations of kinetically experienced events, which seem to reflect the burgeoning medium of film, and proleptically to foreshadow the possibilities offered by digital poetry. When the speaker in 'The Barn and The Down', for example, walks through the poem, 'the great down in the west/ Grew into sight' and the barn 'fell to a barn' (CP, 131). Smith articulates the effect of these lines as follows: 'The landscape is no mere canvas against which to parade a self-contained passion, but a three-dimensional space into which the speaker moves.'⁸³

Thomas's focus in these poems on multiple temporal and spatial perspectives places a further emphasis upon process, and, in accordance with this, despite constantly shifting divagations, these poems rarely strain for conclusions. However, even when the context is inverted, so that focus is placed on the outer rather than the inner world, exact reference points also remain. This happens in 'Beauty' and 'Out of the dark'. It also happens, to a lesser extent, in 'Adlestrop', which moves outwards from a narrow focus on the platform in the first two stanzas to the wider world, represented by 'Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire' (CP, 73). There is an acceptance of multiplicity and an ability and willingness to relax into indeterminacy as the movements of divagation confidently

⁸¹ Smith, p. 97.

⁸² For further discussion of this point, see Michael Schmidt, *An introduction to Fifty Modern British Poets* (London: Pan Books, 1979), p. 75, p. 77.

⁸³ Smith, p. 97, p. 101.

inhabit the poem. These movements offer in their multiplicity one certainty in this exploratory journey: that nothing is certain. This unhurried and open acceptance of alternatives contrasts with the difficulties Thomas identifies in, for example, in his review of the early writings of Ezra Pound, whom he describes as being 'pestered with possible ways of saying a thing'.⁸⁴ In his own poems, Thomas exploits the limited perspectives of the speakers and then moves beyond them. The effect is to place such fragmented visions firmly within a fragmenting world.

spiralling

Turning and turning in the widening gyre⁸⁵
William Butler Yeats

Spiralling movements in literature and literary composition are endemic in the first decades of the twentieth century. They appear not only in Woolf's re-evocation of the fluttering movements around the fabric of Goethe's 'Weaver' and Woolf's 'surrounding' envelope, but in the whirling vortices of Wyndham Lewis, and in Yeats's 'widening gyre'. Spirals are even identified by Pound in the traditional Japanese Noh dramas that influenced him, Yeats, and Thomas's close friend and collaborator, Bottomley. Pound writes:

I am often asked whether there can be a long imagiste or vorticist poem. The Japanese, who evolved the hokku, evolved also the Noh plays. In the best 'Noh' the whole play may consist of one image. I mean it is gathered about one image. Its unity consists in one image, enforced by movement and music.⁸⁶

This fascination with spirals is connected to a sense of flexible open-endedness in the writers of this time, as well as to a sense of impending chaos in the run-up to two world wars, such chaos being proleptically anticipated in these spiral images.

Thomas also often resorts to a spiralling movement.⁸⁷ This is evident in the first chapter of his *Jefferies*, where he traces several successive routes of the physical area in which Jefferies grew up, the area that forms the imaginative source of Jefferies's later writings. The geographical connections between the names and roads of this area as recorded by Thomas form a series of quasi-spiral patterns.

This is also a pattern that Jefferies himself followed in 1879 in *Wild Life in A Southern County*. When writing this book, Jefferies found that the lives of the different

⁸⁴ Review of *Exultations of Ezra Pound*, 'The Newest Poet', *Daily Chronicle*, 23 November 1909, p. 3.

⁸⁵ 'The Second Coming', in *Selected Poetry*, p. 99. Written in 1919.

⁸⁶ 'Vorticism', *Fortnightly Review*, n.s.96 (1914), 461-471 (p. 471, fn. 1).

⁸⁷ See Thomas to de la Mare, Bodleian, MS Eng lett c 376, Letters to Walter de la Mare, folio 239 (30 August 1914); also, many reviews by Thomas of Yeats's work, for example, 'Deirdre', *Bookman*, 33 (October 1907), 47. He does not, however, refer to Virginia Woolf, although she reviewed him in 1917.

animals and birds he wished to write about were so interconnected with each other and with their habitats that it was difficult to separate them. As a result, he decided to arrange the chapters of the book so that their titles and content correspond in some degree to the contour of the country he was writing about. As he notes in the preface to the book, 'commencing at the highest spot, an ancient entrenchment on the Downs has been chosen as a starting place from whence to explore the uplands.' The chapters then follow a stream downhill, past a village, a solitary farmhouse and 'finally come the fish and wild-fowl of the brook and lake; - finishing in the Vale'.⁸⁸

However, whereas Jefferies moves simply from the highest to the lowest point in the land he covers, Thomas, when tracing Jefferies's physical and imaginative homeland, adds an extra dimension to his movements, spiralling round from west to east, up north and down south, and then into an inner circle from west to east again. In addition, while Jefferies traces the interconnectedness of the various living beings and the land on which they live, Thomas highlights the space that divides them. He refers, for example, to the unnamed, anonymous, 'scattered farms' lying between the spiralling lines he records, giving the impression of an open-ended, unfinished journey. This is evident at the end of one mapped list of names in his *Jefferies* when he writes: 'the villages of Wanborough, Liddington, Badbury, Chisledon, Wroughton, Broad Hinton, Ogbourne, and Aldbourne, with the downs and scattered farms between.'⁸⁹ Even in an exhaustive list of geographically connected names, the vast tracts of downs and 'scattered farms' remain anonymous.

The spiral is also present in Thomas's poetry. It occurs in 'The Lofty Sky' which moves up to and then down from

The tops of the high hills,
Above the last man's house,
His hedges, and his cows (*CP*, 79)

It surfaces in the speaker's oscillating reflections on the plant in 'Old Man' as he spirals through conflicting emotions: 'The herb itself I like not, but for certain/ I love it' (*CP*, 19). It is also evident in the expansion in 'Adlestrop' from the single point of the station name and the linear line of a platform on a railway line to the 'farther and farther' (*CP*, 73) widening perspectives of spiralling flight. John Bayley's discussion of the drafts of 'Adlestrop' reveals Thomas's deliberate cultivation of this spiralling movement. Bayley notes how in the final version of the poem Thomas 'abandons the short choppy sentence structure' of the two first stanzas to create the smoother movement of a spiral. Bayley then

⁸⁸ Richard Jefferies, *Wild Life in a Southern County* (London: Smith, Elder, 1879), preface, p. viii. For further discussion see Hooker, p. 23.

⁸⁹ Thomas, *Jefferies*, p. 13.

refers to the 'enveloping stillness which succeeds the contrasts. The full stop is taken out; the grass, flowers and hay united, as it were, with the stillness of "the high cloudlets in the sky".'⁹⁰

lack of conclusiveness

There may be excuses for inconclusiveness⁹¹
Edward Thomas

Spirals suggest seamlessness and continuity, but also a lack of conclusiveness. They are repetitious but not exactly so. This quality of spiralling movement provides a solution to what critics have identified in Thomas as an awareness of the overwhelming amount of material available to him, material that does not fit into any ordered manmade structure. As Smith says of Thomas's poem, 'A Tale', it is 'replete with history, offering everywhere fragments'.⁹² Longley reads the list in 'November Sky' as showing 'Thomas's anxiety to fill in the whole picture: "Twig, leaf, flint, thorn, /Straw, feather, all that men scorn".'⁹³ Thomas comments himself on the obliterating effects of such abundance of new material in a discussion of the way streets evade taxonomy in *The Heart of England*. He writes:

Streets are the strangest thing in the world. They have never been discovered. They cannot be classified. There is no tradition about them. Poets have not shown us how we are to regard them. They are to us as mountains were in the Middle Ages, sublime, difficult, immense; and yet so new that we have inherited no certain attitude towards them, of liking or dislike. They suggest so much that they mean nothing at all. The eye strains at them as at Russian characters which are known to stand for something beautiful or terrible; but there is no translator: it sees a thousand things which at the moment of seeing are significant, but they obliterate one another.⁹⁴

Smith interprets this passage as presenting 'the paradoxical fullness of meaning which turns into emptiness'. Elsewhere, he emphasises the impression of emptiness or obliteration in a reference to the 'series of self-cancelling voices' in Thomas's 'The Signpost'. He also notes, when discussing Thomas's poem 'It rains', that 'a large number of Thomas's poems open thus, with a negative construction in the first sentence which inserts absence right into the heart of an achieved and actual world'.⁹⁵ Bayley, too, in his discussion of 'Adlestrop' and 'Old Man', talks of the 'diminishing of perspective into nothing'.⁹⁶ Jeremy Hooker refers to Thomas's italicised phrase '*There is nothing left for*

⁹⁰ John Bayley, 'The Self in the Poem', in Barker, pp. 39-48 (p. 43).

⁹¹ Bodleian, MS Eng lett c 376, Letters to Walter de la Mare, folio 66 (9 October 1909).

⁹² Smith, p. 130.

⁹³ Longley, *Poetry in the Wars*, p. 122. Longley refers to 'November Sky' as 'November'.

⁹⁴ *Heart of England*, p. 4.

⁹⁵ Smith, p. 127, p. 111, p. 100.

⁹⁶ Barker, p. 44.

us to rest upon' in *The Country* as support for a view that resonates with Longley's interpretation of 'November Sky'.⁹⁷ Hooker writes: 'Finding nothing to rest upon, in a decaying rural culture, and with a language of Nature from which a sense of the sacred was evaporating, Edward Thomas attempted to supply the lack.'

However, Thomas's attitude to emptiness, lack and absence is more complex. In the passage on strange streets, Thomas laments the lack of a translator when viewing, or attempting to 'read', the streets. The consequence of this is that the eye 'sees a thousand things which at the moment of seeing are significant, but they obliterate one another'.⁹⁸ As seen in Chapters Two and Three, Thomas's judgement of a good translation rests on its ability to contain absence, and thus to acknowledge the existence of the source text. In the passage in *The Heart of England*, his allusion to translation is, therefore, an allusion to that process of retaining and expressing absence rather than following the urge to fill in the picture of what is seen with the obliterating significance of 'a thousand things'. As a result, when Thomas attempts to 'supply the lack', as Hooker words it, in 'November Sky', he concludes a list of 'twig, leaf, flint' with the deliberate generalisation of 'all that men scorn' (*CP*, 13). His selection of this generalisation points to his recognition both of the impossibility of completing that list, and also of the need to resist the urge to fill it in so that the quality of 'overlookedness' can be preserved. Thomas's much earlier work, *Oxford*, also provides examples of this resistance of the urge to name, as when he completes the phrase 'you see that the caged thing is –' with the word 'nothingness'.⁹⁹

Thomas's statement in *The Country* that '*there is nothing left to rest upon*' is similarly deceptive. These are in fact neither his own words nor those of the narrator of the story, but are spoken by 'a country-bred man with a distinct London accent' whom the narrator encounters. Later, it transpires that the narrator of *The Country* has a different view. After relating a story told him by this character of the endurance of an old man he meets in the woods, the narrator comments that

I have given it [this story] because unintentionally it refutes his [the character's] statement that there is nothing left for us to rest on. There was something firm and very mighty left even for him, though his melancholy, perverse temper could reach it only through memory. He had Nature to rest upon. He had those hills which were not himself, which he had not made, where were not made for man and yet were good to him.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ *The Country*, p. 6, Hooker, p. 79.

⁹⁸ *Heart of England*, p. 4.

⁹⁹ *Oxford*, p. 147.

¹⁰⁰ *The Country*, p. 6, p.1, p. 10.

By encasing this view, that what there is left to rest on is not possessed by man, in the equivalent of such *Matryoshka*-like asides, Thomas strengthens its claim. Once it has been deciphered, it acts like the central point of a unicursal maze.

It is significant, also, that in the modern urban world, Thomas finds an equivalent to the power of ancient hills or mountains in the multiplicity and strangeness of streets, as if they, too, can offer rest. This equivalence is reiterated in a second passage from *The Heart of England*, a significantly named book in terms of this discussion of the core point of a spiral, in which Thomas relates streets to other powerful natural images, writing that 'their surfaces hand the mind on to the analogies of sea waves or large woods.'¹⁰¹

Crucially, it is absence, as exemplified in the features of the land that 'were not himself' and in the lack of knowledge about streets, which provides stability. Such absence, as Thomas has observed in relation to translations and original work, provides an external measure of what is present. In writing, too, the stability inherent in absence is related to the fact that it lies outside the control of the writer. It is this which makes it so significant, powerful and affirming. The apparent image of impotence that closes Thomas's poem, 'The Glory', expresses this succinctly. The line reads: 'I cannot bite the day to the core' (*CP*, 199). This image, expressing a lack of core, apparently paradoxically also provides a substantial core. It fulfils its own lack.

Thomas's way of coming to terms with the overwhelming wealth of material he traces, and his 'translation' of it into poetry, consists of resting within its multiplicity, staying on this side of determinacy, in the process of making and seeing, remaining on the thresholds that feature so much in his work as crossroads, ridges, stiles, doorsteps and bridges. As Smith puts it, 'for Thomas "meaning" is just irrefutably there'.¹⁰² The strangeness of the streets that threaten, like the Russian characters, to 'obliterate one another' in *The Heart of England* and the 'cul-de-sacs or broken threads' of his prose that, in *The Happy-go-lucky Morgans*, Thomas fears are 'shapeless fragments' left 'useless in their place', become a source of richness for him.¹⁰³ Typically, and generously, the 'labyrinthine syntax' of the divagations in his poetry allows such 'broken threads' to have shape and purpose.¹⁰⁴ Thomas's description of streets in *The Childhood* as an image of infinite possibilities is applicable to the divagatory threads of his poems. He writes: 'The

¹⁰¹ *Heart of England*, p. 4.

¹⁰² Smith, p. 105.

¹⁰³ *Heart of England*, p.4; Thomas to de la Mare, Bodleian, MS Eng lett c 376, Letters to Walter de la Mare, folio 181 (date of 5 or 12 February 1913 added in pencil).

¹⁰⁴ Smith, p. 110.

labyrinth of them, all running at right angles and parallel to one another, with some *culs de sac*, could be mastered but indefinitely extended.’¹⁰⁵

Thomas’s approach to writing poems and the eventual poems he produces reflect and turn upon the process of composition itself. As a result, the observations that have been made about Thomas’s processes and poems can also be applied more generally to the process of composing in different periods. As noted earlier, the image of ‘sewing whatever was nearest to hand’ that forms the central core of the meditation on language and naming in *The Drier The Brighter* poem, ‘patched work’, for example, is, aptly, taken from the work of Thomas’s contemporaries, Freud and Woolf. It also reflects Goethe’s *Faust*, written a hundred years earlier. In addition, Thomas’s use of absence as an affirming presence in his work and the effect of his decision to remain in process in his poetry are also very relevant to the fragmented and open-ended products of twenty-first-century digital poetry.

Conclusion

The areas that Thomas maps out in his poetry are ‘indefinitely extended’ to an ever-receding threshold, since what is presented as text is always unfinished or penultimate, focusing, as he expresses it in ‘The Mill-Water’, on the moment before or after ‘all thoughts begin or end’ (*CP*, 235). His poetry resists conclusions. Instead, he constantly returns to the subjects of twilight, dawn, the edge of a forest, resorting frequently to qualifiers such as ‘nearly’ and ‘almost’, ‘hover[ing] continually on the verge of what is probably inexpressible’.¹⁰⁶ It is his ability to re-enact the process of composing in his verse and to stay within that process, even once the poems are complete, that indicates why, as Vernon Scannell puts it, Thomas’s best work ‘has always attracted an admiring and devoted readership, especially among other poets’.¹⁰⁷ Proof of this is evident in W. H. Auden’s use of the epithet ‘Edward Thomasy’ in reference to his own poem ‘Rain’, which he records as being ‘the Edward Thomasy poem I can’t recall writing’.¹⁰⁸ Further evidence is provided by the seventy or so poems that Anne Harvey has collected in *Elected Friends: Poems for and about Edward Thomas*. These range from poems written in Thomas’s time to poems written in the late twentieth century. It is also shown in the readings in 2005 by twenty-three poets, who included such established names as Gillian

¹⁰⁵ *The Childhood*, p. 41.

¹⁰⁶ *Letters to Bottomley*, pp. 40-41 (10 November 1902). Thomas was referring to Bottomley’s poetry.

¹⁰⁷ Anne Harvey, ed., *Elected Friends: Poems for and about Edward Thomas* (London: Enitharmon, 1991), introduction, p. 10.

¹⁰⁸ See W. H. Auden, *Juvenalia: Poems 1922-1928*, ed. by Katherine Bucknell (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 100.

Clarke, Seamus Heaney, U. A. Fanthorpe, Michael Longley, Andrew Motion and Tom Paulin, of their own 'Thomasy' poems at the *Edward Thomas and Contemporary Poetry* conference at Oxford University.¹⁰⁹

By recording and re-enacting the dynamic quality of the composing process within his work, Thomas encourages other writers to reconsider and refine their own approaches to poetic composition. In the context of this thesis, an immediate example of such influence is provided by my collection, *The Drier The Brighter*. Written in tandem with the research on Thomas's poetry, this collection inevitably reflects and builds on many of the qualities I observe in his work. However, its composition process also has a direct influence on the writing of the thesis. It not only, therefore, contributes directly to the research conducted on Thomas, but, in many cases, initiates and guides that research. This is because many of the points observed in relation to Thomas were first conceived as a result of observations of the composition process of *The Drier The Brighter*. In addition, the research and writing up of the thesis has an effect on the composition of *The Drier The Brighter*. The subject-matter, style and form of the completed poems, the process of selecting pieces for the final collection, and even the order in which they are arranged in that collection, all reflect and refract the points made in relation to the process of composing in the previous five chapters. *The Drier The Brighter*, therefore, forms an appropriate conclusion to this examination of composition processes:

¹⁰⁹ The term 'Thomasy' is also discussed in a lecture given by Guy Cuthbertson, 'The Edward Thomasy Poem in the Twentieth Century', at the 2005 Oxford University *Edward Thomas and Contemporary Poetry* conference.

The Drier The Brighter

Accidental Commitment

*Because I left the door ajar,
a sparrow hopped inside to scour
the skirting board for fluff,
twigs, leaves, a scrap of cloth
with which to line the temporary nest
it planned to build itself
within this bare-walled, desolate
and, what I would have called
till now, most uninhabitable heart.*

Order

Dedication

Accidental Commitment

Epigraph

'dwelling ardent with awareness'

Poems

lost

-wards

patched work

Lateral Moraine

The Reckless Sleeper

5 am

One Minute's

Pieces

Spring Hijack

dawn

On a Walk

Plough's Progress

three wishes

midway

Spring

View from a caravan

Above Steep

On I Tow

the verge

May Hill sequence

uprooted

how your whole life

Scenes from Dr Bach's Flower Remedies

Towards a Study (Chawton)

Song to the rain

Fraught

'too much autumn'

Words to love

absence of birdsong

The anchoress

Building

Undeterred

Rain Vision

Dawn Frieze

The Drier The Brighter

Lines of topography

Not Something To Take Seriously

Travelling

unfamiliar

Thanks

End-paper

Still life with quinces and lemons

*dwelling ardent with awareness
and constant thorough understanding
of impermanence, observing sensations
in sensations*

Mahāsatipatthāna Sutta

lost

, thick mist

we have been walking miles

surrounded by peat hags
surrounded by acid-whitened stones

you unearth your compass
still puffing

I hold a corner of the map
if you dropped dead, I wouldn't have a clue

a hawk flies past
it took him a few breaths from the bottom

we go off in another direction
to meet black peat circles surrounded by white

the mist finally lifts

the age-long ridge falls beneath us
gathered
into folds of silk

-wards

The snow falls thickly,
a strong wind moves
the white-fronted geese flying south,
grey wings out of cold,
calling in half song,
half bark.

An early moon, knife-edged,
shining indiscriminately,
cuts light on anyone.

The train takes me north,
scooping into the cold
air, sharp and clear,
where there is no sound,
not one -
the fields unravelling,
the trees running backwards
in my wake,
behind.

patched work

... disconnected morphemes floated past

it was perhaps the sixth day that we fished for them
storing our catch in shallow bowls
where they shone, transparent
kaleidoscopic

certainly the temperature shot down

was it at that point that the seamstress was asked
to line language with things?

her needle ran hither and thither
with no time to cut patterns
sewing whatever was nearest to hand

I can see her now
racing the cold

but who remembers the cracking as the ice advanced

the rising and falling of lights...?

Lateral Moraine

with thanks to Bill Manhire

'Thei seyne, but I have not sene,' Sir John Mandeville

Antarctica –

 where the weather is made
deep white, the empty home of penguins,
skua-gulls, elephant seals, bodies
preserved in plenty of ice
carved out at the ocean edge:
vestiges of past polar expeditions.

This is the land of the story of the seal
that crawls the wrong long way up the valley
till, deathly tired, it lifts its head
to gaze one last time upon the impassable glacier-cliff,
sighs the seal-equivalent of 'shit',
and, rolling its eyes to the sky,
expires.

Each walker tests the surface
with an ice axe. Records remain of tunnels
to the centre of the earth, a stray yeti, the odd
polar bear, The Thing, its remake, lost
Atlantis, lost races, lost....
in the hut of Scott,
a smell of pony.

The Reckless Sleeper

with thanks to Matthew Sweeney & René Magritte

I lie, unmoving, above the top bunk, bony on the luggage rack.

They have given me

no bedding, no pillow, but I am plagued with things –

a mirror angles at me the reflection of the dark, and something like a bird perches
on my shoulder, whispering in the language of the train:

go to

sleep go to

sleep goa to

sheep

That ribbon is not mine – it belongs to the lady in the bottom bunk.

goat sheep sheep

deep

What's it doing, dancing among my things?

leap

Deeper, in the shadows, apple-grey, hides the light of the conductor.
Perhaps I should blow it out? If I could

weep

into the dark,

enter inter

enter the black

inter en terre

inter the dark

en terre enfer

en terre the dark

black sack of

en fer en fer

keep

5 am

these cold skies
cheating the dawn,

these bits of tree,
blocks of houses too close to houses,
shrouded people, shrinking in the weather.

One Minute's

surface of a cup
Twinings

11/11
11.01 am

Imperial War Museum café
window view:

leaves *birch*
 lawn

un-
blurred / disturbed

Pieces

We sit in the unmade garden
in mid-argument,

you on the cleaner chair,
left leg crossed, ankle resting on right knee,

me on the dirtier chair,
right leg crossed, ankle resting on left knee.

Who is doing the mirror?
Ah, here starts another argument.

You stir
from one buttock to the other

and out of your loose black shorts
I watch your legs extend

how they place themselves,
how they shift, settle -

jigsaw pieces:
it would take one click.

Spring Hijack

Mid-March.

On one of those grey February-ish mornings with the lamplights still on
I drive out of town in search of green.

Even here the land is road-riddled.

Snow, disguised as cloud, hangs above the AA-recommended inn,
brooding over the roundabouts and the petrol pumps,

traffic on my trail.

Some time soon the air will fill up with white,
and all the grave country roads will turn to car-park.

dawn

waking almost too late
for the tiny gold stitches of cloud
a bird flies from one aerial to the next
the sun rises from behind a roof
the room turns pale yellow
I hide behind a vase

On a Walk

The lower gate is open, leaning on a stone
far from its post,
the water trough is unfilled,
there is no horse.

Down in the valley at intervals the crows give out a softened caw,
over the rise the rally scramblers hum and roar,
a tiny plane whines through the sky
and, rushing along the backbone of the hill,
the occasional in and out of waves of car,
measured against the liquid clatter of a single horse's hooves.

Which one reflects my song?

My tread sets off a pheasant, startling
the quiet air and me:
its indignant rattling flight, its body like a bottle – its rapid whirring wings a fly's,
while the skylark's continual commentary
breathes in song,
breathes it out.

The horse hooves are slowing, cease,
the rally race announcer trails away
behind the sound of baaing sheep,
the upper gate clangs shut.

Plough's Progress

with thanks to Philip Gross

The tall ship ploughed the sea
the sea scored the ploughshare
the plough cut through the ocean
the ocean broke up the clod.

the clod rowed over the blue
the blue crafted a spade
the spade blued into a skiff
the skiff shot over a sail

the sail cut through a harrow of soil
that the plough crumbled back into clods
as all the sea's waters poured over the rake
who sailed far off into the blue

three wishes

thoughts wish for fire-irons:
to stoke into fumes

words wish for sticks:
to break up the bones

the itch, for a plough:
to make the blood run

midway

caught between Christmas and the New Year
more than half of Brighton's older West Pier

the thin struts that lead from the landing form
have been smashed by the steps of a winter storm

the shore-line is studded with tripod stands
Palace Pier investors, rubbing their hands

wood from the half-collapsed pavilion sweeps
southwest down the coast to Portsmouth beach

the wrecked silhouette hovers midway between
the braced lightness of air, the greedy pull of the sea

Spring

I looked down into the shady side of the garden. Spring lifted its head briefly in the form of a bluebell, not those real bluebells in the *Flower Fairy* books but the raggedy versions with upturned ends to the petals and a kind of mauvish hue.

Over the wall was the road. The kerb of the pavement on the other side was decked with uncut grass. It was mid-morning and the stream of traffic had thinned a little, enough to allow a glimpse of bare tarmac. It was a grey-white dull day, the air heavy with the moisture of threatened rain.

View from a caravan

Earlier the leaves' greens were what
struck me, not the haws. It was raining then,
wings fluttering in a puddle –
a bird's laughter?

Tonight it's the haws that are looking lovely,
the leaves less green,
and the bird's bath has shrunk
inside its gravel shore line.

Above Steep

where the sweet-toothed Edward Thomas lived with his family

The ruined cottage is no longer there
and it's the wrong season for periwinkles
but nettles and sticky weed
crawl in and out of the forest
over moss-encrusted logs
decades old
up the big long-legged lane
dark and bog-ridden
towards the hanger -
an hour to the top
over slippery chalk

He must have spent much of every day
travelling, and she,
with her groceries: flour, sugar

On I Tow

on i tow on no wot i no
av luv vul va
yes i sey yes i sey
may i av luv vul va i yam
now on w no won now on w no won
no way yaw on

the verge

bright yellow daffodils
running down the bank
not quite falling

the stream

May Hill sequence

1

Light Leaves

The leaves on the beech have just uncurled -
seasoned, they'll grow dark and sturdy
but for now the light passing through their surfaces
is a pale refreshing green
softening tree trunks, earth, grass, air,
lifting spirits.

11

Dandelion Vision

someone is having a barbecue,
voices carry more than a mile over grassland

from the sunken road
the meadow rises to eye-level,
its raggedy green, its crop of dandelion heads
solid and light as balls

dandelions

dragged from the lawns
turfed out of the cornfields

111

The Bulbs of May Hill

When the hill is planted with conifers
and they spread their pine needle carpet
it becomes too dark for the bulbs
who wait.

It can take a generation
before the trees are culled for furniture
but the bulbs seem to know -
one touch of sun on the earth
and that spring they'll come up:

this year they are on a roll,
passing the baton like pros,

colour

well-practised
after all those seasons below ground.

white yellow blue yellow

The elite academy of snowdrops
making way for the daffodils,
the bluebells racing to the foxgloves,

there's even a flash of orchid -
no flower is ever extinct -
and months later the purple white-stalked crocus,
leafless.

uprooted

through mud I go
dragging a whole field along
half on each boot
ploughing on

how your whole life

how
yourwholelife
isrippeda
parhowyoucanno
longertrustany
onehowtheonlymin
dyouknowisyo
urshownote
venth
at

Scenes from Dr Bach's Flower Remedies

Beeches tumble down the hill,
straining to meet the elms
that stand apart.

Grass stalks tangle in tendrils of chicory.

It is quiet.
The rain begins.

Below, near Walnut Tree Cottage,
water trickles down the willow leaves,
Edward straightens, aspen-tall, his face a quiver of sky.

He must be looking for water violets.
All spring he has trawled the hillside for flowers
slouching up as far as the ancient track...

on this side, where prickles, yellow petals, defy the hopelessness of gorse;
on that side, where larches start towards the sky.

Towards a Study (Chawton)

Teashop, cottage, donkey carriage,
draped by the shadow of the manor house
and half a hill.

All round the garden (reduced)
cottage flowers grow like weeds.
A woman digs.

Up in the dining-room,
its door left creaking,
on a tiny table

laid with inkpot and quill,
now blotter-less,
light pours.

Song to the rain

*Rain, rain, fall away.
Don't come back another day.*

*Keep falling. Keep
the cracking of my heart
at bay.*

*Smooth my wrinkled edges
with your downpour.
Wet them. Stay.*

*Keep dryness from me,
staving off the day.*

Fraught

I'm practising aerial irritation.

The air is rippling
from breath and thrown stones.

Each oscillation
pushes me further from the true.

Think *plumb-lines*, I tell myself,
about to
topple.

Flailing,
I set my focus
on the sharp
rope underfoot,
the stretched tautness
in my legs,
the heat that gasps out of my
drying

womb
and rushes up my trunk to fill my face,
the itch dancing to unheard music
on what was once my fontanelle,

and somehow
keep standing.

too much autumn
the reds are almost scorching now
a mouth brimming with leaves

Words to love

Listen, love

listen, love
looks aren't everything

flab under the taut string vest
sick sweet teeth

bones meeting

Don't

head buried, trying
for the heart, between the breasts,
missing by inches

Hold me lightly

hold me lightly love
there is no room

soon I shall burst from your arms
like a butterfly from a ruined chrysalis
like the guinea worm from the stomach of its host

absence of birdsong

notes towards a death poem

6.00 am: traffic starts to shake the tower

hand writes

upper body in shawl, lower in blanket

a clock ticks

blood whistles in ears

pause to pick nose

back curves to ache, creasing stomach

slight stiffness on left side of neck

emptying head

ah, quietness!

The Anchoress

The aim is to achieve
an existence as simple and bare
as a coffin;

decoration
is being slowly stripped
from the six surfaces: walls, floor, ceiling.

So far she is down to a worn piece of rug over a fraction of the floor,
an old blue strip of towel on the wall,
no mirror,

a stool, a sleeping mat,
writing materials, a holy book,
an oil-lamp, a blanket and a twig for cleaning teeth.

The daily bowl, for food or excrement,
is passed by the helper
through a cat-flap in the door.

The world communicates through two slits in the wall.
There is little visual contact.
She finds direct daylight blinding.

She doesn't know it yet,
but underneath the slits
someone has painted a mouth for smiling

at misfortune, her own
or others'.

Building

Gaudi's instructions to an apprentice (unsaid)

Work stone till it flows,
till pillars tilt,
till ceilings drip,
till floors undulate.

Roll up marble. Twist it into columns of smoke,
plait it into balconies and pout their lips.
Crease roofs. Stud them with ventilators
sheathed as warriors riding the swell.

Ignore the city fathers standing aghast,
the sponsors refusing to move in.

Do not consult.

This is how my 'Pedrera' mansions broke the grip on the streets, and why
the cathedral is still building a hundred years after
a tram ran me over to strike out
no body in a hospital ward.

Undeterred

He threw a brick through the window
I double-glazed it

He picked the lock and made off with the computer
I took the chance to upgrade both

He took the car
I took up walking

He used a jemmy to break down the door
And take my tools, my radio, my iron, the upgraded computer and my aunt's antique mirror

The insurance came visiting
I wore a suit

I bought more expensive tools, radios, irons and computers
Though I could not buy back my aunt's antique mirror

The police have padlocked the door back on its frame
And I am having a new one made of hardest mahogany

Next time he will respect the thickness of the door
That, at least, will be impregnable

Even if he carves it out, complete with frame,
And empties the whole house

Rain Vision

Turning the corner, I see you looking up into the trees.

'Listen,' you say. 'The parallel universe of birds.'

I stop, arrested by your eyes, your half-collapsed umbrella.

'You look so happy,' I say.

You gaze at me, smiling.

The rain, the rain.

Dawn Frieze

How clean the lines in an early morning sky,

Against washed rose, orange cream.

Single birds fly south,
Tiny silhouettes,

But there is always a rogue winging north.

I watch from my window, naming the colours.

A slow streak of cloud twists diagonal from the earth,

Jagged as lightning,
Bold as a witch.

The Drier The Brighter

The colours wear themselves out
whirling tree shapes to the ground -
the fir-shaped fir,
the oak-shaped oak
backed by a sky relief,
fathers like sons,
thin long birches,
European elms,
acacia-shaped acacia,
the drier the brighter,
blind bright,
blinding the eyes,
down to the ground.

Further off, there's rattling -
faster, furious.

A woman,
gale-force wind,
a falling tree.

After paucity of rain, short winters, cold, a dullish sky:
the brilliancy of celibacy.

Lines of topography

Behind, the hillfort rises and dips,
barely threaded with harebell.

Up above, birds mob a buzzard.

Before, the grassed-over slope falls away, ribbed,
right down to a Constable:
tiny cows in a meadow, bordering trees.

Everywhere:
lines of topography.

Not Something To Take Seriously

The world is blue and grey.

Everything reduced somehow
to edges.

Each to our bit
in these pooh stick wars.

I cut into the pantomime.
My part is so amusing.

Muffing the duff lines. Laughing
at the thin clean light in your eyes.

Oh the craziness of it all –
not to be taken seriously.

Travelling

Sheep, stiles, hedgerow, lane, rough
squares of field, grass, stone wall,
wire, discarded tufts of fleece.

Words tumble. Some of my jokes
don't crack. We pant
and talk of everyday. Soft landings.

Trees shrink. The grass gets shorter. Hill
turns to craggy peak. Sun comes out and vanishes.
Wind beats us.

On top, the atmosphere
has turned to milk -
smooth as the Pennines it flows.

I walk down to the edge of a wood
where a branch of tiny stiff green fir-cones
dips into a pool of blue bells.

'Look!' The others are too deep
in talk, but a chocolate brown lamb tears over
from its flock of white and grey.

Later, sat silent in my room, watching the sky-
colour turn orange-blue:
things I never do.

unfamiliar

withdraw from love, set back your sights

, refrain from reaching for the heights:

ward off that swooping wing

from titillation to the blight

that comes from tasting

of too much delight

; instead let space

stay unfamiliar

for more

of less

is

.

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