

# Yet verses are not vaine: elegy as performative utterance in a secular age

This exegesis and the accompanying manuscript of poems, 'Things I've thought to tell you since I saw you last', are submitted for the Doctor of Philosophy in Communication of the University of Canberra.

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## Abstract

Poets have written elegiacally since the earliest times, giving meaning to and interpreting death. In doing so, they have made use of the consolations and explications found in mythology, magic and the narratives of religions. But how can the enduring popularity and power of elegy be accounted for in our increasingly secular age, when conventional consolations – from pagan tales of rebirth to more recent religious assurances of heaven and eternal life – are increasingly unavailable to the poet and, in some cases, have been assertively rejected? The aim of my practice-based research has been to explore this field through conventional scholarly research informed by creative practice.

Central to my thesis is the notion that elegy still ‘works’ because it constitutes a performative utterance: a linguistic statement that performs the action to which it refers. In this case, that action is the ‘work of mourning’. I draw on J.L. Austin’s linguistic category of performative utterance to ground my argument. My exploration also considers psychological theories of human mourning and its progression – from the first shock of loss to final resolution – and the work a grieving individual must undertake in order to emerge from mourning. Elegiac poetry often illustrates one or more of the phases of mourning, sometimes in a single poem, sometimes in a succession of poems. A particular manifestation of the performative utterance in elegiac poetry: the *ave atque vale*, or ‘hail and farewell’ elegy, is particularly illuminating because in these poems – from Catullus’s 1st Century BCE lament for his brother through to 21st-century works – the performative utterance takes the form of the ‘hailing’ (naming) of the dead person by the poet, in order that they may be decisively ‘farewelled’. In this way, the poet enacts what Freud and others identify as the critical final stage of mourning: the detachment of the mourner’s libido from the person who has died.

I examine the notion that human beings draw upon fictions to help them perform this necessary work of mourning, and the extent to which the elegist’s employment of such fictions is central to elegy’s efficacy as a performative utterance and to its consolatory power. Although these fictions are creatures of the mind, they nevertheless help people to progress through the work of mourning. Writings by theorists from Kant through to Vaibinger and beyond are relevant to this discussion, as is Wallace Stevens’ poetic exploration of the notion of supreme fictions. I conclude that elegy gains at least some of its potency and efficacy not from the articulation of conventional consolations, but from the consolatory effect of performing the work of mourning – work that is acted out by the elegy itself.

The creative component of my thesis is a manuscript of poems that explores related issues, sometimes in lateral ways. The poems address human mortality and actual deaths and, in ‘performing’ their own examination of this thesis’s preoccupations they examine a variety of issues that underpin the more theoretical work they accompany.

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

But, for the unquiet heart and brain,  
A use in measured language lies;  
The sad, mechanic exercise,  
Like dull narcotics, numbing pain.

So wrote Alfred Tennyson, in one of the best-known English-language elegies, ‘In Memoriam’ (1900, p. 9). While the poem is among the longest elegies – coming in at 133 stanzas – the few lines cited above in some way encapsulate the extraordinary challenge of the elegist across the ages. How, the poet asks, can this possibly work? What do I do here? Address the dead, whose ears can no longer hear? Beseech one whose eyes are stopped? Tell of my love when it is too late? Memorialise, when even *I* doubt the permanence or purpose of my enterprise? Make sense of the senseless? Impose a pattern on chaos? Why do I write what hurts to write? Why write what hurts others to read?

And yet, by the very act of elegising, the poet proves the efficacy, makes the sense, brings pattern to chaos, sees through the hurt to what lies beyond.

Bereavement and mourning have provided subject matter for poets since the earliest known written records, and even earlier: some of the great epic poems of oral tradition, including Homer’s *Iliad*, were as remarkable for their nuanced explorations of grief as for their battle scenes or their political and amorous intrigues. Poetry whose primary aim is elegiac (by which I mean poetry dealing mainly with loss, bereavement and mourning, rather than poetry in which the elegiac content forms a sub-plot in a greater heroic narrative) has a traceable tradition almost as long.

The word ‘elegy’ has its roots in the elegiac couplets of the Ancient Greeks and Romans, the term originally referring not so much to the mood or content of the poem as its metre –

‘alternating dactylic hexameters and pentameters in couplets known as elegiac distiches’ (Baldick 2008, n.p.). These couplets dealt with love, politics or war as commonly as with commemoration or condolence. They were often performed to the accompaniment of a flute or pipe – the instrument fashioned in myth by Pan and emblematic of his grief at the metamorphosis of the nymph Syrinx, which would go on to become one of the most familiar images employed in poetry of mourning. Over time, the term ‘elegy’ became associated with verse whose subject matter was loss and consolation. The pastoral elegy that grew from ancient rootstock (and which would be revived by poets including John Milton in the 17th century) gave rise to a number of conventions, including the characterisation of the dead person as a shepherd, mourned by the natural world, and the invocation of nymphs and muses. It was about the time of Milton’s ‘Lycidas’ (1637) that the term ‘elegy’, in English at least, came to usually denote a poem of lament (Baldick 2008, n.p.).

The definition of elegy used in this research will be Fowler’s (1987, p. 71) generously encompassing one:

... ultimately classical in origin, transplanted into modern European terminology only as a word, without the classical formal basis, unrestricted as to structure (except for the minimal requirement that it be a verse composition) overlapping with a number of similarly inexplicit terms (complaint, dirge, lament, monody, threnody) yet conventionally tied to a limited range of subject-matters and styles (death and plaintive musing) and readily comprehensible to educated readers.

Elegy’s popularity has waxed and waned. In the 16th and 17th centuries, for example, whole anthologies of elegies were published to mark certain individual deaths. Even an individual as relatively obscure as the young cleric and minor poet Edward King had a volume of elegies published in his memory (John Milton’s ‘Lycidas’ was an inclusion). More renowned or publicly beloved individuals were even more thoroughly elegised. The death of Sir Philip Sidney in 1586, aged 32, gave rise to no fewer than three volumes of elegies, though as Pigman points out, there were motivations other than simple grief at play –

including a rivalry between Oxford and Cambridge universities. Cambridge managed to issue a volume of elegies for Sidney even before his funeral. Included was a sonnet by James VI. Adding savour to the swiftness, Cambridge dedicated the volume to Sidney's uncle, the Earl of Leicester, who happened to be chancellor at Oxford. Oxford responded with not one but two volumes of Sidney elegies, explaining that the delay had been due to the depth of grief felt by that institution and its scholars (Pigman 1985, p. 57).

Among the early poets to employ many of the elegiac conventions that would still be in use thousands of years later were the 3rd-century BCE poets Theocritus and Bion. The latter's 'Lament for Adonis' is regarded as a classic of the pastoral elegy form. Bion has another distinction: on his death an unknown elegist composed 'Lament for Bion', thus beginning a new trend – the poetic mourning of a real, named individual, rather than a portrayal that conventionally clothed the dead individual in the persona of a god, demigod or other figure of mythology (Hanford 1961, pp. 33-34).

Two centuries later, the Roman poet Virgil (70 BCE to 19 BCE) imposed his own stamp on the pastoral elegy in his 5th and 10th eclogues. The '10th Eclogue', while a love lament, makes use of many of the motifs and conventions of pastoral elegy: invocation of the muses; the procession of mourners; references to the end of the day; and the departure of the shepherd at the conclusion of the poem. The 5th employs a range of elegiac conventions, including the pathetic fallacy – the notion that nature mourns for the dead person (Virgil 1990, pp. 11-14, 24-26).

Pastoral elegies were sometimes written by poets for other poets, such as the 'Lament for Bion' already mentioned. This tradition helped embed one of the persistent conceits of elegy – the notion that the writer is a poetical successor of the dead person. When English poets revived the pastoral model, they too used it to lament the deaths of fellow poets. Spenser's

‘Astrophel’ was an elegy for Sir Philip Sidney; Milton’s ‘Lycidas’ lamented the death of his poet-cleric friend, Edward King; Shelley’s ‘Adonais’ mourned John Keats; Matthew Arnold’s ‘Thyrsis’ was written for Arthur Clough. Over time, as we will see in the coming chapters, the notion of the elegist as a poetical successor to another dead poet developed into a notion of the poet as inheritor of a mantle as elegist more generally – as someone delegated or authorised to elegise.

We humans have a fearful fascination with death – both with the deaths of those known to us, and with our own inevitable deaths. With this fascination comes a need to give meaning and bring method to death. Over the course of history, humans have located this meaning and method in stories: in mythology and in magic, in the narratives taught by religions and in the transcendent ghost stories of spiritualism. At various times elegy has drawn upon all of these stories for its consolations and its explications. But how do we account for the enduring popularity and power of elegy in an increasingly secular age, when the conventional consolations of bereavement – the pagan tales of rebirth and transformation which evolved over time into more recent religious assurances of heaven, eternal life and eventual reunion with those we have lost – are increasingly unavailable to the poet, and in some cases are assertively rejected?

The central aim of my practice-based research has been to explore this field, through conventional scholarly research informed by creative practice. The following chapters and the accompanying manuscript of poetry examine the notion that elegy (focusing largely on western, English-language examples) still ‘works’ in the 21st century – with and without religion – because it constitutes a performative utterance: a linguistic statement that performs the action to which it refers (Austin 1955). In this case, that action is the ‘work of mourning’.

My exploration of elegy is contextualised by a consideration of various modern western understandings of human mourning, especially those developed in the 20th century: how mourning progresses, from the first shock of loss to final resolution, and the work a grieving individual must undertake in order to emerge – intact but altered. I examine the way elegiac poetry often illustrates one or more of these phases, sometimes within the confines of a single poem, sometimes in a succession of poems written over a period. The poems drawn upon include some that offer traditional religious or pastoral consolations, such as reassurances of eternal life, or the prospect of reunion with the dead at some future point, as well as those that seek to dispense with traditional consolations altogether.

I discuss and make use of the early articulation by J.L. Austin of his linguistic category of performative utterance (Austin 1955, p.5), as well as the subsequent development of his theories (in sometimes unexpected and contested directions) in the decades since, by writers including the philosopher Jacques Derrida. My interest in Austin's work centres on the question of whether elegy can be considered to be a performative utterance and, if so, in what way? In answering this question I draw again on religious and secular examples, making the case that elegy gains at least some of its potency and efficacy not from the articulation of conventional consolations, but from the consolatory effect of performing the work of mourning – work that is acted out by the elegy itself.

I also undertake an extended examination of one particular manifestation of the performative utterance in elegiac poetry: the *ave atque vale*, or 'hail and farewell' elegy. In these poems – examples of which can be found from the time of Catullus's influential 1st-century BCE elegy for his brother, through to elegy being written in the 21st century – the performative utterance takes the form of the 'hailing' (naming) of the dead person by the poet, in order that he or she

may be decisively farewelled. Thus, the poet enacts what Freud identifies as the critical final stage of mourning: the detachment of the mourner's libido from the dead person.

These considerations lead me to consider, in depth, the notion that human beings draw upon fictions (religious and otherwise) to help them perform the necessary work of mourning. A key question is the extent to which elegy's 'success' as a performative utterance – for those with religious beliefs, as well as for those without – depends in part upon the elegist's employment of fictions. These are the fictions, large and small, that many individuals acknowledge to be creatures of the mind, but that are nevertheless vital; that render life liveable, allowing people to function in the face of loss and grief. I discuss writings relating to the use of fictions, from Kant through to Vaihinger and beyond, and examine how such fictions are frequently used to consolatory effect in elegy – and may, indeed, be a hallmark of elegy as a poetic form – with special reference to Wallace Stevens' poetic exploration of the idea of supreme fictions.

My overall aim is to determine whether it is the performative action of elegy that grants it much of its power and efficacy, even in the absence of conventionally consolatory content. It is not the intention of my research to either imply that, or ascertain whether, elegy might be a tool of psychotherapy or, more generally, whether the writing (or reading) of elegy might be packaged up and prescribed as a form of therapy for those wounded by loss. Nor, except in a glancing fashion, will this research explore elegy as it interacts with intractable or pathological, or complicated mourning – the kind of mourning for which therapeutic treatments might perhaps be in order.

Over the millennia a number of distinct elegiac sub-categories have emerged, often arising in response to the events of particular historical periods. These include the pastoral elegy, war elegy, anti-elegy, self-elegy, lynch elegy, holocaust elegy and epochal elegy (elegies

mourning the end of a century, or the conclusion of a distinct historic period). Some examples from these sub-categories will be touched upon during this research but the primary focus will be on individual and personal elegy – poetry arising out of the actual loss, through death, of an individual close to the elegist: a spouse, a parent, a friend, a child, a colleague. Sometimes, the loss explored by the poet will be complicated by the fact that the death was unexpected or premature – the elegist may mourn the extinguishment of a young person’s potential and promise (especially the promise of a fellow poet), or the cruel loss of a loved infant or child.

This research also focuses on elegy written by someone entitled (by proximity or relationship) to stand as elegist (rather than elegies written for distant celebrities, for example, though a few of this type will be mentioned). The focus will be on elegy written about friends, lovers, children. Of course, some powerful elegies are written from a polite distance, like Theodore Roethke’s hesitantly heartfelt words for his student, Jane, thrown by a horse – he, the teacher, the poet, the elegist, ‘with no rights in this matter, / Neither father nor lover’ (Roethke 1957, p. 116). So too, some elegy is written in the choppy, unnavigable wake of the death of someone from whom the poet has become estranged: a former lover; a sibling grown astray; a spouse grown away; a love unrequited or undeclared; or a love unacknowledged by society. Examples of these poems too will be presented in the coming chapters.

Some of the elegies examined will mourn deaths that are traumatic or violent, or seemingly without meaning: deaths in war, or by suicide, for example. Considering the distinctive impetus for such elegies and the complications surrounding such deaths, it is intriguing to discover the extent to which such elegies employ the same generic conventions and share the same ultimately consolatory impetus as elegies that mourn deaths that occur in far less traumatic circumstances, deaths that are far less freighted and perhaps less fraught.

This research draws, for its theoretical framework, upon a number of schools of critical analysis, rather than mapping a single theory onto elegy as a form. This approach has been taken, in part, because the poems explored and compared span many centuries and diverse religious, scientific and social milieu, and because my research reaches into a number of disciplines, including psychology and linguistics, as well as literary theory and criticism. To properly engage with the guiding questions at the heart of this research, it is necessary to account for the poems examined not simply as artefacts, whose meaning is determined by their immediate historical contexts, but as inheritors of a tradition spanning centuries of profound cultural and religious change. I read these elegies as texts whose internal workings create part of their own context, as works that perform (for both poet and reader) an act, rather than simply describing something, and as texts that can be viewed through other prisms too.

In particular, the theoretical framework for this research will draw upon insights provided by Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the broad example of New Historicism. As will become clear in Chapter 2, the persistence of poetry in western social mourning customs renders it fertile ground for Psychoanalytic Criticism – especially since grief and mourning as expressed in literary texts have been treated as legitimate subjects for psychoanalytic inquiry since that science’s earliest days. Indeed, the ‘father’ of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, was, in 1897, also the first in his field to subject a literary text to psychoanalytic criticism, applying his own theories to Shakespeare’s handling of death and grief in *Hamlet* (Freud 1961, pp. 264-266).

Overall, my primary guiding critical framework is New Historicism, which enables me to combine textual analysis and comparison of textual devices across centuries and cultures, and the elucidation of shared or divergent approaches to the elegiac form. The flexibility of this approach allows for the simultaneous application of insights from a number of theoretical frameworks (such as psychoanalytic analysis). New Historicism emerged in the 1970s and

1980s, in part as a reaction to New Criticism's insistence on the sacrosanct position of the text, and has since been developed into a range of perspectives. It is especially associated with Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher, whose *Practicing New Historicism* remains influential. They write that '[t]here is no longer a unitary story, a supreme model of human perfection, that can be securely located on a particular site' (2000, p. 5). They also assert that:

The characteristically double vision of the art of the past – at once immersed in its time and place and yet somehow pulling out and away – is deeply related to our understanding of our own aesthetic experience. We never feel that we can simply put off all our historically conditioned longings, fears, doubts and dreams, along with our accumulated knowledge of the world, and enter into another conceptual universe. But at the same time ... [i]n a meaningful encounter with a text that reaches us powerfully, we feel at once pulled out of our own world and plunged back with redoubled force within it (2000, p. 17).

New Historicism seeks out patterns that are repeated (whether in political ideology, social practice or art) and regards texts as embedded in a web of discursive formations that give them meaning (Buchbinder 1991, p. 114). Thus, it seeks to understand a text in its historical context, while also seeking, in turn, to understand the historical context by reference to the texts that are its artefacts. New Historicism avoids the dogmatism of traditional historicism, which held that the meaning of a text, sometimes almost in its entirety, could be deduced from its historical context. At its most reductionist, traditional historicism asserted that the history of a thing amounted to a sufficient explanation of that thing. When it came to cultural artefacts, traditional historicism tended to treat literature as a product of its time, almost as if it had been petrified in a peat bog at the instant of creation and was therefore readable beyond that time only as a historical artefact. In some of its manifestations, historicism also encouraged a narrow form of relativism – the notion that ideas and beliefs, as well as texts and paintings, because products of their period, were therefore to a significant extent unreadable after that period.

One of the most strenuous critics of historicism, Karl Popper, attacked the theory on the grounds that, far from confining themselves to a study of the past, or an explication of cultural artefacts as products of the past, advocates of historicism used their analysis of what *had happened* to predict what *would happen*. In *The Poverty of Historicism* Popper (1960) accused advocates of the method of drawing unsupportable analogies between events in very different ages and societies, and then proffering these as proof that ‘life cycles’ – starting with conception, progressing to maturity and ending in death – applied to societies and entire civilisations as well as organisms. Once one believed in an evolutionary ‘law’ that could lead societies inexorably to their fates, Popper said, one could ‘discover historical confirmation of it nearly everywhere’. But this, he said, was just another instance of metaphysical theories being seemingly confirmed by facts that, if examined closely, turned out to be selected in the light of the very theories they were supposed to test (Popper, 1960, p. 111).

While the seductive lure of evidence that fits the hypothesis poses a challenge for any researcher, it poses special challenges in relation to research like mine, which is practice-based, and therefore arguably engages with subjectivity to a greater degree than certain other types of scholarly inquiry. I have therefore sought to maintain a high degree of reflexivity in conducting my research.

For literary critics anxious to protect the primacy of the text, historicism of any kind can appear threatening. As Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000) conceded in their introduction to *Practicing New Historicism*, privileging aspects of a cultural artefact beyond those aspects deemed relevant or important by earlier critics (artistic excellence, canonical acceptance, and so on) can result in the elevation of works that have been hitherto denigrated or ignored, allowing them to claim space in an already crowded academic curriculum, or ‘diminishing the value of established works in a kind of literary stock market’ (2000, p. 10). Among the texts

thus elevated, or at least brought into the light for critical appreciation or attention by New Historicism, have been texts that had previously enjoyed a marginalised academic existence – works by racial and religious minorities, and works by women, for example. New Historicism does not see history as a single totalising context, but as expressed in diverse ways and as discontinuous. It recasts ‘history’ as histories – multiple, simultaneous and even conflicting.

The challenge, when applying such a theoretical framework to literature (or indeed to anything), is to distinguish the significant from the insignificant. As Gallagher and Greenblatt (2000, p. 15) put it:

We have embarked on what Ezra Pound in an early essay calls ‘the method of Luminous Detail’ whereby we attempt to isolate significant or ‘interpreting detail’ from the mass of traces that have survived in the archive, but we can only be certain that the detail is indeed luminous, that it possesses what William Carlos Williams terms ‘the strange phosphorus of the life’ in the actual practice of teaching and writing.

Indeed, the authors admit that they see, in their own critical work, the importance of ‘having it both ways’ – being able to delve deeply into the ‘creative matrices of particular historical cultures’ while at the same time identifying why and how certain products of those cultures ‘could seem to possess a certain independence’ (Gallagher & Greenblatt 2000, p. 16). More generally, Greenblatt has argued for the importance of:

pull[ing] away from a stable, mimetic theory of art and attempt[ing] to construct in its stead an interpretive model that will more adequately account for the unsettling circulation of materials and discourse. (2013, p.13)

In my own research, I have sought to explore elegy as both a product of its time and place (or more accurately its times and its places) and as a poetic form through which poets challenge, confront, renegotiate and even bring about change in their ‘time and place’. And I have also sought to give the text itself due regard, to discover how poetic excellence speaks clearly through the matrix. Writing about this act of weighing – which he hazards in his book *Elegy and Paradox* – W. David Shaw muses on the challenge of balancing text and context in the

study of elegy, in circumstances where the very subject matter – death – imposes its own limits on both scholarly and creative understanding (1994, p. 244).

What we mourn in an elegy, is never simply the other but the limits of our understanding and a loss in ourselves ... For many modern elegists there can be no thanatology or science of death, because death is a loss to a void beyond understanding.

Shaw attempts to build the bridge between text and context but the weight of his research is on the side of text – what he calls the ‘independent aesthetic power each elegy possesses ... the irreducible simplicities that touch the mind and enter the heart’ (1994, pp. 245-246).

And why not? It is plain that literary texts can speak eloquently to readers many centuries, or even millennia, hence, often without much need for a detailed understanding of the historical context in which they were written. But that is not to say that an understanding of, or appreciation of, a style, a genre, a form, or a poem cannot be enriched or illuminated by some understanding of the time and place in which it was produced, or the links between that time and place and others.

Because New Historicism balances the primacy of the poetic text with an awareness of the historical, cultural and social context in which it was written, it is particularly relevant to a longitudinal study of a poetic form that has been intimately connected with, reactive to, and active upon the broader social and religious conventions of grief and mourning. New Historicism accepts that writers make use of many broadly shared social and cultural meanings. However, it recognises that they may do so for the sake of negotiating or challenging social values, rather than simply to create artefacts that belong to one time period alone. This insight is especially relevant to a study of elegy, which at many points in the form’s history has played just this kind of renegotiating function – most recently during the decline of formal religious observance and the rise of secularism, over the past century or so.

Consistent with my interest in the flexibilities of New Historicism, the primary research method I employ in the exegetical component of this research is contextual analysis. This allows me to make connections between the elegies examined, and the social, political and cultural environments in which they were written, the literary traditions within which certain works are situated, and the life and circumstances of some of the authors of these elegies. Contextual analysis assumes that a literary work cannot mean a great deal in utter isolation from the contexts of its textual production, and it also recognises that context may help reveal the extent to which a poet has modified, or challenged the conventions or constraints of their period. Thus, it marries well with a theoretical approach that examines text and context, word and world, poetics and poet.

My practice-based research has also provided me with significant insights into the poems discussed in the chapters that follow. Linda Candy's definition of practice-based research as 'original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice' (2006, p. 3) accords with my own approach. The knowledge I have gained through writing the manuscript of poetry accompanying this exegesis has deepened my response to my research question and has illuminated aspects of my exegetical exploration. It has also added to my general understanding of the elegiac form. In the attached manuscript I have created numerous contemporary elegies and elegy-like poems investigating as a form of heuristic research issues involved in identifying and articulating through practice the key themes and issues I identify in my more formal exegetical research. The manuscript, drawn from a larger number of poems produced during my research, is thus the result of a deliberative creative and practice-based research process. It was produced simultaneously with my exegesis and approaches the same questions and concerns in creative terms – why does this ancient poetic form still have such compelling

power, and what characteristics of the contemporary elegy may connect it to the elegiac tradition more generally?

## Chapter 2

### The psychology of grief and the work of mourning

Lear: '*Howl, howl, howl, howl!*'

(*King Lear* Act V Scene III)

The human response to death and loss has been the subject of literary, philosophical, psychological and religious inquiry since the earliest surviving written records were created. The evidence is that for as long as humans have made stories about what it is to be human, they have explored themes of mortality and loss – across continents, across cultures and across belief systems; in fiction, in verse and in philosophical rumination.

This chapter will look at some of the key documents informing western traditions relating to bereavement and grief, including literary and philosophical texts. It will also outline the development of modern, western psychoanalytic theories relating to human responses to bereavement and the idea of mourning as a process, with distinct stages to be worked through. And it will explore the extent to which (mainly English-language) elegiac poetry across the ages reflects, in its concerns and its content, these theories, and could therefore be said to be an active contributor to the work of mourning. Examples will be given to illustrate the nexus between the theories of mourning and the content of elegiac poetry.

In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the earliest written versions of which date to about 2000 BCE, the unknown author speaks directly and devastatingly of Gilgamesh's astonished and unconquerable grief at the death of his friend Enkidu, and of Gilgamesh's subsequent, fruitless search for immortality. It is interesting that one of the earliest known pieces of literature should also be an interrogation of personal bereavement and loss, as well as an exploration of the awareness of personal mortality:

Over his friend, Enkidu, Gilgamesh cried bitterly, roaming the wilderness. 'I am going to die! – am I not like Enkidu?! Deep sadness penetrates my core, I fear death, and now roam the wilderness. (Kovacs 1989, p. 75)

Stricken by the inevitability of his own mortality, Gilgamesh determines to seek the secret of eternal life from the only mortal man in history who has attained it: Utanapishtim, who survived the Great Flood. It does not end well – if success is measured by the achievement of immortality. By another measure, however, the epic ends on a profoundly salutary and successful note: Gilgamesh returns to the place from which he started out, armed with, and reconciled to, the knowledge that he will one day die.

The thematic preoccupations of *Gilgamesh* reveal that sophisticated literary and philosophical explorations of grief and mortality have been attempted by writers since early in the known history of written texts – and potentially even earlier, since the extant written versions of *Gilgamesh* emerged from older oral narratives (Spar 2009, n.p.). More than a thousand years after *Gilgamesh*, in *The Iliad*, Homer famously and painfully tackles the topic of parental grief for a dead child, by way of Priam's poignant and abject appeal to Achilles for the return of Hector's body (which Achilles has subjected to the ignominy of being dragged behind a chariot). The scene is an affecting one – Priam kneeling at Achilles' side, offers a king's ransom for Hector's return: "I have endured what no one on earth has ever done before – / I put to my lips the hands of the man who killed my son" (Fagles 1990, p. 605). The human need to wrest some control, some decision-making power, over an event that is effectively beyond the survivor's capacity to influence it, outside his or her spheres of power and knowledge, is deep indeed. Hector is dead and cannot be restored, but he can at least be returned to his people, to be properly farewelled, with the performance of appropriate rituals.

Crantor's once-celebrated work, *On Grief*, which is preserved only in fragments (Morford 2002, p. 60), including in Plutarch's later *Consolatio ad Apollonium* (Plutarch 1928), is one of the earliest known examples of consolatory correspondence and influenced the writings of

Panaetius, Cicero and St Jerome, as well Plutarch. Crantor recommends self-control in the matter of mourning, while simultaneously regarding grief as natural and necessary. Plutarch confronts the reality of loss and bereavement on his *own* account in *Consolatio ad Uxorem*, a letter written to his wife after the death of their young daughter. In this letter, Plutarch counsels his wife not to attempt to banish the loving memories of their daughter and the pleasure the child had brought into their lives, from a mistaken hope that enforced forgetting might ameliorate the pain of loss (Plutarch 1959, pp. 585-586):

But I do not see, my dear wife, why these [qualities of our daughter] ... after delighting us while she lived, should now distress and dismay us as we take thought of them. Rather I fear on the contrary that while we banish painful thoughts we may banish memory as well, like Clymenê, who said

I hate the crooked bow of cornel wood,  
I hate the sports of youth: away with them!

ever shunning and shrinking from what reminded her of her son, because it was attended with pain; for nature shuns everything unpleasant. But rather, just as she was herself the most delightful thing in the world to embrace, to see, to hear, so too must the thought of her live with us and be our companion, bringing with it joy in greater measure, nay in many times greater measure, than it brings sorrow.

In the last decades before the Common Era, Virgil wrote the *Eclogues* that would inspire and influence so much subsequent pastoral poetry, including pastoral elegy. The fifth of these eclogues introduces tropes that will recur in elegiac poetry over the millennia, including nymphs weeping for a dead hero. It also employs conventions, such as the pathetic fallacy (the conceit that the natural world revolts in sorrow at human loss), that have become standard for elegiac verse (Virgil 1990 n.p.):

Where the plump barley-grain so oft we sowed,  
There but wild oats and barren darnel spring;  
For tender violet and narcissus bright  
Thistle and prickly thorn uprear their heads.

A reflexive, self-analytical examination of loss and grief from the 5th century can be found in St Augustine's *Confessions*, in which the author lays bare his reactions to the deaths of a dear friend and his own mother. Among the phenomena explored by Augustine are the feelings of guilt sometimes experienced by survivors, the acute awareness of one's own mortality that

can threaten to overwhelm one's response to the death of another, and the lengths to which individuals will go in order to suppress or repress an awareness of their mortality (Augustine 1907, Book IV, n.p.). 'I was grown deaf by the clanking of the chain of my mortality,' Augustine writes, neatly encapsulating his simultaneous obsession with, and flight from, the knowledge of personal extinguishment (Augustine 1907, Book II, n.p.).

The mathematician Robert Burton (1577–1640) was one of the first western writers to deal with bereavement and loss from a more methodical and scientific, rather than primarily philosophical or spiritual, viewpoint, as well as one of the first to articulate the differences between 'normal' and pathological bereavement. In *The Anatomy of Melancholy* Burton describes normal grief at the death of a loved one as a transitory form of melancholy that, while it might amount to a 'cruel torture of the soul', is able to be distinguished from melancholy as a disease (Granek 2010, p. 259). With Burton's exploration, the seeds of scientific discourse on the matter of mourning are sown.

Burton's treatise, while presented and received as a medical text, is nevertheless replete with extracts from Latin verse. This propensity to refer to literary sources for examples to illustrate and lend authority to psychological theory is something Burton has in common with others who have explored the psychological foundations of human behaviour, including Freud and other early pioneers in the field of psychoanalysis, three centuries after Burton's own investigations. The psychological sciences are notable for mining the literary and mythic past for characters exhibiting the behaviours and pathologies observed in living, breathing individuals. In some instances, even the names given to disorders or psychological manifestations have been drawn from myth or literature. Consider, for example, narcissism and the Oedipal complex, both named for figures from classical mythology, and sadism and masochism, which were named after French and Austrian writers respectively.

While Burton turns to Latin verse for his inspiration and examples, later investigators of human psychology broaden their frames of reference. Alexander Shand quotes Tennyson and Shakespeare to illuminate his psychological theories in the early years of the 20th century (Shand 1914). Freud too is fascinated by Shakespeare, as well as by Sophocles and Dostoevsky. Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic readings of Edgar Allan Poe are influential (an example is his *Seminar on the Purloined Letter*: Jacques Derrida subsequently produced his own critical analysis of the conclusions Lacan reached in this seminar). In the 1970s Bruno Bettelheim (1976) identifies in the broad, black-and-white strokes of folk fairy tales the existential predicaments that are the common human lot, while in the same decade Felman (1977, p. 9) argues that,

[f]rom the very beginning ... literature has been for psychoanalysis not only a contiguous field of external verification in which to test its hypotheses and to confirm its findings, but also the constitutive texture of its conceptual framework, of its theoretical body.

Susan Fischman (1987, p. 211) writes,

[i]t is not unusual to find that ... literary text[s] anticipate Freudian psychoanalysis in interesting ways. Writers have been animating their characters with psychological insight as early as Sophocles, and Freud himself acknowledged his debt to literature.

Lionel Trilling, in his essay *Freud and Literature*, recounts an exchange on the occasion of Freud's 70th birthday, when Freud was greeted by a well-wisher who hailed him as the 'discoverer of the unconscious'. According to Trilling, Freud corrected the speaker and disclaimed the title, saying, '[t]he poets and philosophers before me discovered the unconscious. What I discovered was the scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied' (1951, p. 34). Trilling continues,

[t]o pass from the reading of a great literary work to a treatise of academic psychology is to pass from one order of perception to another, but the human nature of the Freudian psychology is exactly the stuff upon which the poet has always exercised his art (1951, p. 34).

Jean-Michel Rey, in his essay on the subject, *Freud's Writing on Writing*, observes that for the early psychoanalysts, literature seemed to play a 'decisive, catalytic role' (1977, p. 303). How, he ponders, can we properly understand the advent of a science that claims Greek tragedy and mythology as its antecedents, and that writes its genealogy by means of recourse to literature? 'For everything proceeds as if factual continuity ... existed between what Greek tragedy represents and what psychoanalysis "discovers" by other roads, particularly the royal road of the interpretation of dreams' (Rey 1977, p. 310).

What is certainly true is that writers and thinkers from many fields have found the human experience of mourning fertile ground for research, exploration and expression. Alexander Shand (1914), writing just a handful of years before Sigmund Freud's seminal *Mourning and Melancholia*, turns an observant eye on the emotion he calls 'sorrow' in his book *The Foundations of Character*. He identifies various manifestations: the wild and abandoned sorrow that finds vent in sobbing; the mute, tearless sorrow of deep shock; sorrow characterised by a loss of energy and physical depression; and finally, sorrow characterised by madness and frenzy (Shand 1914, pp. 302-303). The roots of all this grief, governed *and* ungovernable, he traces back to earliest infancy, where sorrow is first unleashed in response to an interference with (or frustration of) a person's infant impulses – the confiscation of a toy, or a mother's temporary departure from the room (p. 311).

Sorrow, in Shand's worldview, is how humans respond to an event that overpowers them, and for which they can find no remedy. Thus, he finds in *all* expressions of sorrow – from those of infancy to the griefs of old age; from first loss to last – a single impulse: the cry for help (1914, p. 314). That is not to suggest, of course, that all such human cries will be forever uttered with the un-self-conscious abandonment with which a baby mourns the loss of a rattle, or its mother vanishing through a doorway. As they mature, individuals learn to master their

emotions. Later cries for help may be muted, strangled, modified – out of pride, out of custom, out of consideration for others, or simply because the individual experiencing the sorrow finds new modes of release.

Shand is keen to reduce (or perhaps *enlarge* or *ennoble*) observable behavioural phenomena, such as grief, to scientific, codifiable knowables, or laws, and he sets about classifying the kinds of behaviours he has encountered. One of the common grief reactions he observes is a mourner's initial cognitive and emotional resistance to the permanence of loss, and his or her attempts to alleviate sorrow through restoration of the thing that has been lost (1914, pp. 326-332). Shand illustrates this response with reference to a section of Tennyson's 'In Memoriam', in which the poet writes of his wild thoughts about physically attempting to bring his dead friend Arthur Hallam back to life (Tennyson 1900, p. 21):

Ah yet, ev'n yet, if this might be,  
I, falling on his faithful heart,  
Would breathing thro' his lips impart  
The life that almost dies in me;

Shand also observes that sorrow tends to be heightened if preceded by joy – again finding an illustration in Tennyson. This time, the poem is 'Locksley Hall', and this time, the loss mourned is not brought about by death, but desertion (Shand 1914, p. 335):

This is truth the poet sings  
That a sorrow's crown of sorrows is remembering happier things.

Shand notes that for many mourners, sorrow seems to be ameliorated or diminished if they feel they do not suffer alone – a variation, perhaps, on the aphorism that 'a problem shared is a problem halved'. This time, he illustrates his point with a reference to *King Lear* (Shand 1914, p. 336):

When we our betters see bearing our woes  
We scarcely think our miseries our foes.  
Who alone suffers, suffers most i' the mind,  
Leaving free things, and happy shows, behind;

But then the mind much sufferance doth o'erskip,  
When grief hath mates, and bearing fellowship.  
How light and portable my pain seems now,  
When that which makes me bend makes the king bow.

Closer to our own time, the poet Douglas Dunn alludes to this strangely consoling fellowship in 'Arrangements', from his volume of elegies for his wife. In the office where he waits to register her death, he encounters a stranger, a woman engaged on the same grim task of registering the death of her spouse, and feels as if they should be 'friends forever' (Dunn 1985, p. 15).

Could the desire to find such communion perhaps be one of the underlying motives of individuals who seek out elegy at a time of grief? Can the mourning of others, even poets in the distant past – strangers who are mourning the dead who are also strangers to us – provide a kind of companionship, a relationship born out of emotional proximity? Is there relief to be found in the grief of others?

Shakespeare understood the indiscriminating, levelling nature of loss and grief ('That which makes me bend makes the king bow'). Another who understood the fellowship of feeling between mourners was England's Queen Victoria, who was perhaps seeking to make her own pain 'lighter' and 'more portable' in 1861, when, after the death of her beloved Albert, she turned to the words of a poet, Alfred Tennyson, for her solace. Helen Rappaport, in her *Biographical Companion to Victoria*, says that one of the first works the bereaved monarch reached for in her widowhood was Tennyson's 'In Memoriam', which had been published just over a decade earlier, in the same year Tennyson had become Poet Laureate. 'For a while ['In Memoriam'] would be virtually [Victoria's] only reading, apart from the Bible and religious books,' Rappaport (2003, p. 353) writes.

She soon adopted the poem as the literary emblem of her own grief ... [s]he later transcribed her favourite pages from 'In Memoriam', heavily underlined, into an

album of consolatory words and prayer and annotated her own copy with her personal observations on its Christian arguments.

While there are few who would offer up Victoria as an exemplar of healthy and successful mourning (she never dispensed with her widow's weeds, effectively retired from public life for decades and commissioned the extravaganza of the Albert Memorial, one of London's most ornate pieces of public commemoration, for her dead husband), her instinctive act of reaching for the consolation of elegy in her time of grief was a typically human response. In the privacy of the home, and at public events, at state funerals and at the secular scatterings of ashes, elegies have been recited, cited in eulogies, misquoted at boozy wakes, cried over before sleep, murmured upon waking, published in anthologies and become clickable 'resources' on the websites of morticians. The elegy has earned and sustained its place among the rituals of private and public mourning because it works. And, as this research seeks to show, the *work* it does is the work of mourning.

Emile Durkheim, one of the founders of sociology, explores the uses of ritual in the mourning practices of traditional societies in his 1912 book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. In a chapter on what he terms 'piacular rites' (propitiatory, expiatory or reparatory rites), he theorises that mourning rituals allow a social group to confirm its moral unity and cohesion. The weeping and groaning he observes as a part of funerary rites in a number of traditional cultures serve, he says, to raise the 'social vitality' of the group (Durkheim 1926, p. 401). The rituals of mourning culminate in *putting an end to mourning*. 'Little by little, [these rituals] neutralise the very causes which have given rise to them'. In time, mourners stop mourning, and they do so 'owing to the mourning itself' (pp. 401-402).

A century later, researchers still seek to understand the extent to which recourse to ritual – religious and otherwise – might affect or influence the grieving process. Norton and Gino, for example, find that recourse to ritual improves an individual's capacity to cope after a loss.

They propose that a common psychological mechanism is at the heart of this: the restoration of the feeling of control, which a loss (such as the death of a loved one) threatens to impair (Norton & Gino 2013, p. 1). In clinical experiments conducted with subjects who have experienced either the death of someone close to them, or the end of a significant relationship, the researchers find that recourse to ritual improves an individual's sense of control and lessens his or her feelings of grief – even in the absence of a belief that the ritual will prove efficacious (Norton & Gino 2013, p. 6). In other words, ritual *works*, even when people do not expect it to work, or do not believe it will work. This capacity of ritual to ‘work’ even in the absence of belief, will be returned to in the next chapter, when the efficacy and power of performative utterances is explored.

At about the same time as Durkheim was exploring mourning rituals in traditional societies, Sigmund Freud was drawing his own conclusions about the processes and pathways of mourning. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, published in 1917, five years after Durkheim's *Elementary Forms*, Freud stamps his own authority on the subject of mourning and bereavement, establishing his theories about the various stages of mourning – ideas that have been developed, with remarkably minor modifications, by many who have come after him. Freud postulates that a grieving person must detach their libido (or emotional energy) from the lost individual and reattach it to someone or something else. Successful completion of this work constitutes the completion of ‘healthy’ grieving. Freud (1957, pp. 243-244) puts it this way:

In what, now, does the work which mourning performs consist? I do not think there is anything far-fetched in presenting it in the following way. Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition – it is a matter of general observation that people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them. This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis. Normally, respect for reality gains the day. Nevertheless its orders

cannot be obeyed at once. They are carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic<sup>1</sup> energy, and in the meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged. Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hyper-cathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it. Why this compromise by which the command of reality is carried out piecemeal should be so extraordinarily painful is not at all easy to explain in terms of economics. It is remarkable that this painful unpleasure is taken as a matter of course by us. The fact is, however, that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again.

Freud is clear that this process of abandonment cannot be accomplished in a moment, but is 'long-drawn-out and gradual' (1957, p. 256).

Given the pervasiveness and persistence of his influence on the field, Freud wrote remarkably little on the subject of grief and mourning. But his basic idea – that the journey of grief requires *action* by the mourner – relinquishment, transition, reattachment – is at the heart of many subsequent theories dealing with the stages of grief and the work of mourning. The number of stages or phases may vary, and the linearity of the processes may be nuanced, but the trajectory is more or less the same. John Bowlby identifies three overlapping phases: first, an intense urge to recover the dead person, even when the fruitlessness of such efforts is obvious to others (and sometimes obvious even to the bereaved person); second, disorganisation of personality, characterised by pain and despair; and finally reorganisation (Bowlby 1961, pp. 319-320). Leick and Davidsen-Nielsen propose a variant model that describes four 'tasks', underlining their belief that something active is required of the grieving person. Their tasks are: intellectual and emotional recognition of the irrevocable nature of the loss; release of the various emotions of grief; the development of new skills; and the reinvestment of emotional energy (1991, p. 3).

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<sup>1</sup> Cathexis is the concentration or accumulation of mental energy in a particular channel (Simpson and Weiner 1989, p. 987).

No theorist or clinician has yet imagined mourning to be a smooth, predictable, time-limited journey – even uncomplicated mourning may be a backwards-and-forwards affair. The theorists have been conscious that the tasks or stages they have identified may have to be repeated many times, in different circumstances, simultaneously or in a broadly linear fashion. But where all their theories coalesce, where all their various stages, categories, phases or tasks seem to converge, is in a belief that at the end of successful mourning, emotional investment will have been withdrawn, at least partially, from the dead person. For Leick and Davidsen-Nielsen this process is termed the ‘reinvestment of emotional energy’. Bowlby summarises the general concordance thus (1961, p. 319):

All who have discussed the nature of the processes engaged in healthy mourning are agreed that amongst other things they effect a withdrawal of emotional concern from the lost object and commonly prepare for making a relationship with a new one.

By the last decades of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st, a new generation of theorists and practitioners had begun to challenge the notion that successful mourning requires the kind of explicit, formal detachment Freud proposes. Some were suggesting that while mourning certainly involves a *transformation*, the shift ought to allow the bereaved to retain an active connection with their lost love object (Baker 2001, pp. 55-73). Cohen, Mannarino and Knudsen are among those who subscribe to a model of successful grieving that moves away from the idea of complete detachment and towards an idea of reconciliation. They contend that this reconciliation is achieved by seven progressive steps: accepting the reality of the death; fully experiencing the pain associated with the loss; adjusting to life without the dead person; integrating aspects of the dead person into one’s own self-identity; converting the relationship from one involving ongoing interaction to one based on memory; finding meaning in the death; and recommitting to new relationships with others (Howarth 2011, p. 5). This nuanced departure from Freud’s characterisation of the stages of mourning is especially relevant to my later exploration of the *ave atque vale*, or ‘hail and farewell’ elegies.

Weiss, too, identifies various phases, during which different ways of relating to a loss dominate or recede, with much intermeshing of the phases. He does, however, identify a generally linear sequence, with the loss at first *emotionally* denied (even though it might be *cognitively* accepted), followed by a phase in which the loss is accepted but is still not viewed as permanent. During this phase, attempts are made by the grieving person to reverse the loss. This is followed by a phase during which the loss is accepted as irreversible (with attendant depression), and, finally, a phase during which the loss is accepted as irreversible, but with some anticipation of a satisfactory future life for the mourner. Three processes are required for the mourner to move from grief to recovery: cognitive acceptance; emotional acceptance; and identity change (Weiss 1988, pp. 45-46).

Cognitive acceptance requires the bereaved person to develop a ‘satisfactory account’ of the causes of their loss. For some mourners, a religious rationale (‘God works in mysterious ways’; ‘God only takes the best’) may suffice. The *absence* of a satisfactory account, however, can leave a mourner searching for explanations, or conjuring up accounts in which *they* themselves, or others (doctors, for example), caused, or contributed to, the death (Weiss 1988, pp. 46-47). As we will soon see, poets elegising in relation to unexpected or violent deaths – including deaths involving suicide (Mary Jo Bang), or damaged relationships (Thomas Hardy), often explore these questioning phases, and play out in their poetry this search for an explanation.

Emotional acceptance is very different from cognitive acceptance. Weiss, like Freud, believes that complete acceptance requires the mourner to ‘neutralise’ memories and associations, so that their recall does not paralyse normal functioning. Memories need to be confronted. Over time, the pain lessens and a tolerance for the memory is developed. The bereaved person is required to develop a new image of themselves, in which their connection to the dead person

is seen as a part of a 'past self' rather than a 'present self'. For this work to be fully accomplished, says Weiss, the mourner must make commitments to new relationships, though he points out that this may be a much more realistic expectation after the death of, say, a spouse, than after the death of a child (1988, pp. 46-47).

In fact, common sense suggests that the pitch and duration of any grief, and the ease with which the work of mourning can be achieved, will depend very much on the nature of the loss (sudden or expected, in youth or old age, from violence or natural causes, and so on). And the circumstances may well dictate the strength of the various likely emotions to which the mourner will be subject. Leick and Davidsen-Nielson observe, for example, that guilt is an emotion commonly experienced by mourners. The survivor asks and re-asks, what he or she might have done differently to avert this calamity. Such self-questioning may be amplified and exacerbated for those who mourn deaths by suicide, or for those mourning the death of one from whom they are estranged. American poet Mary Jo Bang openly traces the trajectory of grief, in the year following her adult son's suicide (2007, p. 24):

How could I have failed you like this?  
The narrator asks  
The object. The object is a box  
Of ashes. How could I not have saved you ...

Bang (2007, p. 60) writes of

The hair-tearing  
Grief of the mother  
Whose child has been swept away  
By the needle broom.  
Of all her mindless errors ...

As the anniversary of his death approaches, she reflects (p. 82):

If she had only done X  
When instead she'd done Y.  
Then he would see this  
Sun, this rain, this whatever.

Questioning and self-questioning, reproach and self-reproach of a different kind pervade a number of Thomas Hardy's elegies for his estranged first wife, Emma. His poetic reaction to her sudden (and, to him, apparently unexpected) death is intense and creatively productive. But his mourning is of a curious kind. Again and again in his *Poems of 1912–13* he gives the impression that he can only properly grieve for Emma by conjuring her as she had been in the days of their courtship. And he interrogates himself (and her) about the reasons for their later unhappiness. In 'The Going', (2009, p. 80) he questions the dead Emma:

Why, then, latterly did we not speak,  
Did we not think of those days long dead,  
And ere your vanishing strive to seek  
That time's renewal? We might have said,  
    'In this bright spring weather  
    We'll visit together  
    Those places that once we visited.

And again, in 'After a Journey' (2009, p. 90):

What have you now found to say of our past –  
    Scanned across the dark space wherein I have lacked you?  
Summer gave us sweets, but autumn wrought division?  
    Things were not lastly as firstly well  
    With us twain, you tell?  
But all's closed now, despite Time's derision.

In 'Penance', Hardy is plagued by the thought that 'from year to year' his wife would sit alone, making music on the harpsichord, waking 'each note / In sick sad rote, / None to listen or see!' Hardy admits that he would not join or stay, but 'drew away' (2009, p. 154).

So, too, in 'An Upbraiding', which is voiced, unusually, by the dead Emma, Hardy acknowledges the lack of affection he showed his wife while she lived, and the inconsistency of his restless and real grief now she is gone (2009, pp. 128-129):

Now I am dead you sing to me  
    The songs we used to know,  
But while I lived you had no wish  
    Or care for doing so.

Now I am dead you come to me

In the moonlight, comfortless;  
Ah, what would I have given alive  
To win such tenderness!

When you are dead, and stand to me  
Not differenced as now  
But like again, will you be cold  
As when we lived, or how?

Leick and Davidsen-Nielson argue that sensations of guilt and reproach allow a bereaved person to avoid or delay truly accepting the death as permanent: 'As long as we continue to dwell upon what we might have done differently, we have not yet completely abandoned hope that the death may be reversible' (1991, p. 40). Similarly, feelings of anger – towards doctors, or nurses, for not taking enough care, or towards a motorist, for causing a fatal road accident, for example – allow the mourner to avoid intellectually and emotionally facing the reality of their loss (Leick & Davidsen-Nielson 1991, p. 47).

As long as, rightly or wrongly, someone is able in their mind to blame the doctors, the nurses, the ambulance men for not doing the right thing, then the dead person is, in a way, not quite gone. There is still a magic possibility that what has happened can be changed.

Perhaps Hardy's open ambivalence towards his wife, his accusing tone when he writes of the suddenness of her death (in 'The Walk', 'Your Last Drive', 'The Going', 'Without Ceremony', and 'The Voice') – as though this suddenness is of all of a piece with his wife's general contrariness – allows him to delay fully acknowledging, cognitively and emotionally, the finality of her death. He still has a bone to pick. He still has answers to extract. Little wonder, given his need to continue the conversation, that so many of Hardy's 'Emma' poems feature a visual spectre of his wife, or contain images of haunting ('I found her out there', 'The Haunter', 'The Voice', 'After a Journey', 'The Phantom Horsewoman', 'The Going'). And, as mentioned, in many of these poems, it is the *girlish* Emma that appears to Hardy, not the older, frailer woman of married, loveless life. Is this perhaps because the Emma of their

courtship is the only Emma to whom Hardy *can* speak? The only Emma who can hear him out?

Interestingly, it is not always or only ‘complicated’ relationships that prompt this querulous, slightly accusing tone. Such sensations are also found in the poetic trajectory of a grief that is less problematic.

Here is the 19th-century English poet Coventry Patmore, in ‘Departure’, one of a series of elegiac poems for his wife (Patmore 2004, pp. 40-41):

It was not like your great and gracious ways!  
Do you, that have naught other to lament,  
Never, my Love, repent  
Of how, that July afternoon,  
You went,  
With sudden, unintelligible phrase,  
And frighten'd eye,  
Upon your journey of so many days  
Without a single kiss, or a good-bye?

According to the theorists cited above, the final task involved in the work of mourning is usually the reinvestment of emotional energy – what Freud refers to as the detachment and reattachment of the libido. In some eras, and in some cultures, there have been symbolic acts by which this transition is supposedly achieved (or at least signalled and advertised to society). In western societies, at various times, these signals have included the putting away of special mourning clothing (often black) at the end of specified periods, and the resumption of various kinds of social interactions (concerts, dances, dinner parties, dating) – again, often governed by strict calendars. In Victorian England there were entire books devoted to the etiquette of mourning.

The completion of these designated acts of mourning achieved, in a public way, the mourner’s transition to a new life without the dead person. As Durkheim, cited earlier, observed in

relation to his own researches, ‘little by little’ mourners stopped mourning – and they did so, at least in part, ‘owing to the mourning itself’ (1926 pp. 401-402).

Of course, the transition experienced by a mourner is often not simply to a new life without the dead person, but to a new social role as well. A wife becomes a widow (a husband a widower). A duchess becomes a dowager. A son or daughter might become an orphan. Such transitions can have social and even legal implications that extend beyond the individual. A parent’s death might render someone the new, nominal head of a family (the oldest child, the inheriting son). At various points in history that same death might render other individuals (especially women) suddenly mendicants, dependent on the generosity of an older sibling or someone else to whom a fortune was legally entailed. A monarch’s death can transform a child into the presumptive head of a whole nation – even an empire. A magnate of industry dies, the scion rises. And the rituals of mourning ‘are closely involved in the initiation of the homeostatic mechanisms of society which enable [such] role transitions to occur’ (Haig 1990, p. 42).

Still, for all that a society might encourage and approve of a timely transition through the period of mourning, for the bereaved person there can be intense discomfort, guilt and even shame associated with the act of ‘moving on’. Who could be so flint-hearted as not to be moved by the mortification of the speaker in William Wordsworth’s ‘Surprised by Joy’? A father, transported by the beauty of some un-named thing, turns, ecstatically, to share the sensation with his small daughter, only to recall that she is dead (Burt & Mikics 2010, p. 113):

But how could I forget thee? Through what power  
Even for the least division of an hour,  
Have I been so beguiled as to be blind  
To my most grievous loss?

So painful is that flood of remembrance, that pang of guilt at having indulged in unbidden joy, Wordsworth intimates, that it almost rivals the first, worst sorrow at the time of the child's death itself. In the brief lines of a sonnet, Wordsworth lives out and lays bare no fewer than three powerful, wracking emotions: the shock of recalling that the child, rather than being at his side, is dead; the swift-following surge of guilt that he could possibly have forgotten the fact of her death, even for an instant; and then *renewed* grief at the reminder, and at the shocking *permanence* of his loss.

Prominent among those literary scholars who have analysed elegy in the context of psychoanalytic theories of loss and bereavement is Peter M. Sacks, who interrogates works ranging from Spenser's 'The Shepheardes Calender' and 'Astrophel', through Milton, Jonson, Gray, Hardy and others to Yeats's 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory'. He argues, among other things, that 'healthy' mourning involves a replay of the Oedipal resolution and the symbolic castration that occurs when a child separates from its mother (Sacks 1987, p. 8).

Sacks draws upon Jacques Lacan's refinement of Freud's theories of Oedipal resolution and the castration complex, which de-emphasises Freud's focus on genuine, physiological fear of castration. Lacan's rather gentler 'castration' involves the child renouncing his aspiration to be a fully-satisfying love object for the mother, with the implication that the libido will subsequently be transferred to another. The child's acceptance of this symbolic 'castration' marks the resolution of the child's Oedipal phase. In the Lacanian worldview, this is not a 'violent humiliation' for the child, but the 'founding of a pact between the parties, bound by the solemnification of mutually recognised Law' (Sharpe 2005, n.p.).

Sacks believes that these same processes of (usually, but not always, soft) symbolic castration and Oedipal resolution are at the very heart of some of the most enduring conventions and tropes employed by elegists from the Ancient Greeks onward: the pastoral flautist, the laurel

wreath, and the process of transfiguration of the dead person into something inanimate – a star, perhaps, or a flower. In each of these he traces the detachment and reattachment of libido that is the ultimate end of the work of mourning. For Sacks, these tropes and conventions have their tap-roots in legend – and in two legends of love and loss in particular: the story of Apollo and Daphne, and that of Pan and Syrinx. Both are tales of passionate and unequal attachment, sudden and catastrophic loss, and the eventual reinvestment of the mourner's affection in an inanimate object. And both tales have given rise to persistent elegiac tropes.

Among the most familiar re-tellings of both stories can be found in the Roman poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In 'Book 1' Ovid tells of Apollo's love for Daphne, the daughter of the river god Peneus. Cupid, incensed at Apollo over an unrelated matter, contrives to shoot him with a dart that makes him fall irresistibly in love with Daphne. Daphne, meanwhile, is shot with another dart that makes her shrink instinctively from Apollo's advances. A chase ensues. Daphne flees through the forest, pursued by a love-struck Apollo, till she reaches the banks of her father's river. She cries out to her father, Peneus, for protection and he (somewhat unaccountably) responds by turning her into a laurel tree. Apollo arrives on the scene. To his dismay, even the laurel tree appears to shrink from his caresses. A further transformation is necessary – from tree to laurel wreath, formed from a cut branch: 'The generals of Rome shall be wreathed with you', Daphne is told, and 'your evergreen leaves are for glory and praise everlasting' (Ovid 2004, p. 33).

The story of Pan and Syrinx bears a number of similarities – including a double transition, from nymph to reeds and then, as in the case of the laurel wreath, to a man-made object: pan-pipes fashioned from those reeds.

Ovid puts the story into the mouth of Mercury. Despatched to kill the many-eyed, ever-wakeful Argus, Mercury sets out to lull and beguile the giant through storytelling.

Mercury chooses for his tale the story of the nymph Syrinx, fleeing through the forest from an ardent Pan. Reaching the river Ladon, Syrinx implores her river sisters to save her. They transform her into a bed of river reeds. Pan, arriving on the scene soon after, finds that instead of the nymph's nubile body, he holds only an armful of clattering reeds from the marsh (Ovid 2004, pp. 40-41):

But while he was sighing in disappointment, the movement of air  
in the rustling reeds awakened a thin, low, plaintive sound.  
Enthralled by the strange new music and sweetness of tone, Pan exclaimed,  
'This sylvan pipe will enable us always to talk together!'  
And so, when he'd bound some reeds of unequal length with a coating  
of wax, a syrinx – the name of his loved one – stayed in his hands.

As Sacks points out, in both instances the bereaved lover only truly accepts his loss after he has been able to craft some figurative or aesthetic compensation from his dead love – in Apollo's case, the laurel wreath that would go on to become a dual symbol of victory and poetry, adorning the brows of sporting heroes, victorious generals and poets alike; in Pan's case, fashioning the pipes (sometimes called a flute) that would become the instrument most associated with mourning, especially in the pastoral tradition (Sacks 1987, p. 6).

Both episodes portray a turning away from erotic pursuits and attachments to substitutive, artificial figures of consolation ... Ovid presents a condensed version of this process, a metamorphosis in which the lost object seems to enter or become inscribed in the substitute.

Furthermore, Sacks suggests that the violent physicality of the final transformations of Apollo's and Pan's thwarted sexual impulses – the cutting and twisting of the branch, the slicing and sealing of the reeds – symbolises the castrative element of mourning so necessary to the movement from loss to consolation (1987, p. 7).

Interestingly, Robin Haig, writing in *The Anatomy of Grief*, observes a similar tendency among some mourners to invest an inanimate object – often a personal memento, but sometimes a grave site or memorial – with attributes of the dead person (1990, p. 61). And certainly we can see the same transmutations played out in elegy over the centuries, the same

ancient stories of loss and substitution. An early elegiac reference to the pan pipes as the musical instrument associated with death can be found in the '1st Idyll' of the 3rd-century BCE Greek bucolic poet Theocritus. Here, Daphnis, dying of unrequited love, bequeaths his pipes to their founder, Pan (Edmonds 1912, n.p.):

Come, Master, and take this pretty pipe, this pipe of honey breath,  
Of wax well knit round lips to fit; for Love hales me to my death.

A slightly later reference can be found in the anonymous 'Lament for Bion' – written in memory of the late second and early 1st-century BCE Greek bucolic poet, Bion (Edmonds 1912, n.p.):

O thrice beloved man! Who will make music upon thy pipe? Who so bold as to set  
lip to thy reeds? For thy lips and thy breath live yet, and in those straws the sound of  
thy song is quick. Shall I take and give the pipe to Pan? Nay, mayhap even he will  
fear to put lip to it lest he come off second to thee.

The substance, the essence, of the dead Bion is, for his elegist, inextricably and physically, bound up in the artefact.

The laurel, as a convention of elegy, makes its appearance in the very first line of Milton's 17th-century revival of the pastoral elegiac form, 'Lycidas' (Milton 1993, p. 56):

Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more  
Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere,  
I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude,  
And with forced fingers rude,  
Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.

In the course of the poem Milton references another of the Greek myths, one that shares a number of features with the Apollo-Daphne and Pan-Syrinx stories – the myth of Alpheus. In the version of the myth retold by Virgil and Pindar among others (the version referenced by Milton), the nymph Arethusa becomes the object of Alpheus's attentions. She flees, ending up on the island of Ortygia, where she turns into a well. Alpheus thereupon transforms himself into a river, which flows from Peloponnesus, beneath the sea, to Ortygia, where its waters

unite with those of the well. Here, it is not only the 'lost love' that is transformed. The mourner's *own* identity is refashioned, to accommodate the loss (as described above by Weiss). Mixing, as he does so adeptly, pagan and Christian symbols and allusions, Milton summons Alpheus, in the lines 'Return Alpheus, the dread voice is past / That shrunk thy streams' (1993, p. 59). The 'dread voice' here is generally believed to be that of St Peter (de Beer 1947, p. 60). So it is fitting that this should be the moment in the poem – after grief has been lulled, after anger has had its time – for transformation and for symbols of resurrection. The resurfacing of Alpheus's submerged river from the ocean bed is symbolic of the surfacing (resurrection) of the drowned Lycidas too, 'sunk low, but mounted high' (1993, p. 60).

Centuries on from Milton, the laurel would remain a prominent image in elegy. In the second half of the 19th century, Swinburne farewells Baudelaire with a garland from his own hands in 'Ave Atque Vale' (1940, pp. 225-231), while at the end of that century A.E. Housman wreaths his dead protagonist's brow with a 'garland briefer than a girl's', in 'To An Athlete Dying Young' (Housman c. 1969, p. 22).

We can see that the transformation of the dead – sometimes violent, sometimes as gentle (yet no less profound) as the metamorphosis that takes place within a cocoon – has been a familiar part of poetry dealing with death and mourning. Such poetry serves dual purposes – to ensure an ongoing but altered existence for the dead (even if it is in an attenuated and unreachable form) and simultaneously, to finally put the dead beyond the reach of the living, to effect a final relinquishment, a final rupture. This notion is explored further in Chapter 4, which focuses on one particular convention of elegy: the hailing and subsequent farewelling of the dead, as a particular kind of performative utterance.

Often, there is intense beauty and little violence involved in the transformation. For example, in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the dead are not so much destroyed by the ocean as changed by it (Shakespeare 1973, p. 14).

Full fathom five thy father lies;  
Of his bones are coral made;  
Those are pearls that were his eyes:  
Nothing of him that doth fade,  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange.  
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell.  
Hark! Now I hear them, – Ding-dong, bell.

More bells, more watery death, and more transformation, with an almost physical 'letting go' by the elegist, are present in Kenneth Slessor's 'Five Bells', written a decade after the drowning of the poet's friend, Joe Lynch, who fell or jumped at night from a ferry on Sydney Harbour. Slessor intuitively grasps all the horror of his friend's death (Leonard 1998, p. 119):

I felt the wet push its black thumb-balls in,  
The night you died, I felt your eardrums crack,  
And the short agony.

But there is less violence, and a gentler voice, when he considers what came next – what his friend has *become*. Unlike Shakespeare, Slessor does not designate pearls for eyes and coral for bones. For him, death at sea, with no body found, is a kind of dissolving:

You have no suburb, like those easier dead  
In private berths of dissolution laid –  
The tide goes over, the waves ride over you  
And let their shadows down like shining hair,  
But they are Water; and the sea-pinks bend  
Like lilies in your teeth, but they are Weed;  
And you are only part of an Idea.

An idea of some beauty, nevertheless. Like many elegies, 'Five Bells' displays evidence of multiple points on the journey of mourning. In addition to the transformation described above, there are traces of the poet's struggle to accept his friend's death, his belief that 'if only' he,

the poet, could, even now, *do* something, *be* something, find some way, his friend might not need to be finally farewelled (Leonard 1998, p. 119):

But I was bound, and could not go that way,  
But I was blind, and could not feel your hand.  
If I could find an answer, could only find  
Your meaning, or could say why you were here  
Who now are gone, what purpose gave you breath  
Or seized it back, might not I hear your voice?

Yet in the very next, and final stanza, he admits that impossibility. Straining to hear his friend's voice,

all I heard  
Was a boat's whistle, and the scraping squeal  
Of seabirds' voices far away, and bells,  
Five bells. Five bells coldly ringing out.  
Five bells.

While this chapter has shown that it is possible to distinctly trace, in many elegies, one or more of the phases of mourning identified by psychology, it is uncommon to find a single poem that traverses the entire journey, performing the whole of the work of mourning. Yet that is what we find in Tennyson's 'In Memoriam'. From inconsolable grief and bewilderment to disbelief and attempts to recover the dead, through to a shaky emergence into a new normalcy at the end of the poem, Tennyson takes the reader into despair and out again. Tennyson wrote its component parts over a long period – the period during which he was actually performing the work of mourning of which he was writing. Tennyson's friend Arthur Hallam died in the autumn of 1833. Most of the component fragments that make up 'In Memoriam' were written between then and 1842, with a smaller number written between 1842 and 1849. In the poem itself, the elapsed period is made to appear to be much shorter: about two and a half years (three Christmas seasons occur in the poem).

It is not simply through the prism of modern psychoanalysis that 'In Memoriam' appears to perform the work of mourning in its entirety. Even Tennyson's contemporaries remarked on

the ground traversed over the poem's course. In one early review, J. Westland Marston, in *The Athenaeum* of June 1850, wrote that Tennyson's stanzas 'embody all the phases of feeling and speculation which such a loss induces' (as cited in Hunt 1970, p. 63), while G.H. Lewes, in *The Leader* in the same month called the poem 'the iterated chant of a bereaved soul always uttering one plaint through all the varying moods of sorrow' (as cited in Hunt 1970, p. 64).

Later critics also saw the poem as a navigation of the shoals of loss and recovery. Smith (1977) remarked, '[t]he wayward and incidental nature of their composition over so long a period could be seen to image the vacillations of someone faced with overwhelming loss; in some degree, the obscurity of the structure, its habit of moving in leaps and gaps, plausibly mirrors the movements of such a person's mind' (1977, p. 102). Those 'movements of mind' are typical of the work of mourning, but they are also one of the stocks in trade of the poet.

Sacks suggests that the very length of 'In Memoriam' is crucial to its success (1987, pp. 201-202):

With such a burden of skepticism and such a passionate clinging to the empirical and the personal, there was little chance of Tennyson's finding genuine consolation in an elegy of conventional length. Only the prolonged accretion, the ebb and flow of inner dialogue, the patient piecing together of visionary fragments and the necessarily gradual deployment of typology could resist the tremendous counter-pressure of melancholy.

In terms of construction, Tennyson was well aware that this was a poem about a journey – and that the journey had been a long one. The prologue, addressed to God, was written after most of the other sections, but it sets the scene for the transformation that takes place through the poem: 'Forgive these wild and wandering cries, / Confusions of a wasted youth' (1900, p. 5). Similarly, the epilogue (again written later than much of the rest of the poem), explicitly references the journey the poet has been through (1900, pp. 119-120):

Regret is dead, but love is more  
Than in the summers that are flown,  
For I myself with these have grown  
To something greater than before;

Which makes appear the songs I made  
As echoes out of weaker times,  
As half but idle brawling rhymes,  
The sport of random sun and shade.

Random in their light and darkness they may well be, but the cantos of 'In Memoriam' are hardly random in their selection of motifs and the deployment of the established conventions of elegy. This is self-consciously elegiac verse, drawing on the psychological transformations we have already encountered in this chapter. In fact, during the poem Tennyson frequently and explicitly dwells on the very act of elegising, questioning the efficacy of verse, imagining how his ungovernable grief must seem to onlookers (canto XXI) yet conceding that to *not write* would be an impossibility – 'I do but sing because I must' (1900, p. 23).

In canto V, he writes (1900, p. 4):

I sometimes hold it half a sin  
To put in words the grief I feel;  
For words, like Nature, half reveal  
And half conceal the Soul within.

His ambivalence persists. Even as he remarks on the functional role played by elegy in grief, he concedes that it can only ever be partly efficacious (1900, p. 4):

In words, like weeds, I'll wrap me o'er,  
Like coarsest clothes against the cold:  
But that large grief which these enfold  
Is given in outline and no more.

Similarly, in canto VIII, Tennyson (1900, pp.12-13) refers to his 'poor flower' which he proposes to plant upon Hallam's tomb, '[t]hat if it can it there may bloom, / or dying there at least may die'. There are shades here of Swinburne's later poem for Baudelaire, and the

poet's commitment to '...with rose and ivy and wild vine / And with wild notes about this dust of thine ... fill the place where white dreams dwell / And wreath an unseen shrine' (Swinburne 1940, p. 231).

In canto XXI of 'In Memoriam', Tennyson invokes the Pan-Syrinx tale of loss and transformation which we encountered earlier. This time, the poet fashions pan pipes from the grasses growing on an imagined grave. Other conventional elegiac symbols employed by Tennyson include the Yew tree (canto II) and the invocation of the vegetation god and seasonal renewal (canto XVIII), with the poet arguing that 'tis well; 'tis something' that from Hallam's ashes 'may be made the violet of his native land' (1900, p. 20).

'Tis something', also, to poetically map such a complete way through the work of mourning for oneself, to trace the transformation of oneself, as well as the transformation of the one mourned. In recognition of the fact that this journey involved good days and bad days, progression and regression, alternating anguish and quietude, Tennyson chooses not to assemble the cantos of 'In Memoriam' into a strictly linear journey. This is a forward and backward affair. In the first third of the poem, for example, he interposes a curious canto that uses the word 'calm' 11 times, beginning, 'Calm is the morn without a sound, / Calm as to suit a calmer grief' and concluding by acknowledging the 'dead calm in that noble breast / Which heaves but with the heaving deep' (Tennyson 1900, pp. 14-15). It has the feel of a very late stage in the grieving process. But it is a false calm, the eye of a storm. Tennyson reverts again and again, after this canto, to earlier stages of the mourning journey. There are moments of guilty pleasure – 'how dare we keep our Christmas-eve' (p. 14) and depression – 'With weary steps I loiter on ... My prospect and horizon gone' (p. 36), despair – 'Be near me when my light is low, / When the blood creeps, and the nerves prick / And tingle; and the heart is sick, / And all the wheels of Being slow' (p. 44). There is disbelief – 'Expecting still his

advent home ... thinking, here to-day, / Or here to-morrow will he come' (p. 10). There is hope – 'I can but trust that good shall fall / At last – far off – at last, to all, / And every winter change to spring' (p. 47). And there is relinquishment too, a desire to be finally rid of grief, and be rid, in a sense too, of the paralysing presence of his friend (p. 98):

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky,  
The flying cloud, the frosty light:  
The year is dying in the night;  
Ring out, wild bells, and let him die  
Ring out the old ring in the new  
Ring, happy bells, across the snow:  
The year is going, let him go;  
Ring out the false, ring in the true.

Ring out the grief that saps the mind,  
For those that here we see no more.

In his study, Sacks (1987) is fully cognisant of the challenges faced by the elegist in an increasingly secular and sceptical age, characterised by global war. What relevance, he asks, can the pastoral tropes (for example) have for poets writing in such an age, when death so often obtrudes into life as something immense, meaningless and obscene, or lurks as something hidden from view, on the hospital ward or in the nursing home? In this situation, Sacks says,

most elegists either have withdrawn yet further behind masks of irony or have maintained personal accents at the cost of admitting their reduced circumstances – forswearing traditional procedures of mourning, adopting deliberately unidealised settings, making smaller and more credible claims, if any, for the deceased and for themselves (1987, p. 299).

He cites Auden's elegy for Yeats, 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' (Leonard 1998, p. 104), a poem that he says questions the conventions and idealising ceremonies of the genre and attacks Yeats' 'grandiose posture and his claims for the powers of poetic language' (Sacks 1987, p. 303). And yet, surely this poem, while clearly questioning the conventions, also *modifies* them, *meaningfully*, for a changing world – a world of industry and invention that has experienced one global war and was, at the time of Yeats' death in 1939, poised on the

brink of another. While questioning Yeats' claims for the power of poetry, does not Auden also to some extent confirm those claims, by adapting and modernising the elegiac tropes to reflect the times?

In the opening stanza of Auden's elegy we encounter the pathetic fallacy – but the pathetic fallacy reworked for an industrial, urban age. No longer is it simply *nature* that is recorded as recoiling from a human death, but the entire urban superstructure that modern humankind has imposed to ensure its dominance over fickle nature. It is not just the brooks that have frozen over in mourning for Yeats. Airports (perhaps at that time the most vital emblem of human triumph over natural forces such as gravity) have been rendered 'almost deserted' by his death. In such an age, nature's reaction can be precisely, scientifically, calibrated (Leonard 1998, p. 104):

The snow disfigured the public statues;  
The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.  
What instruments we have agree  
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

Of course, even as Auden is *updating* the pathetic fallacy, he is also challenging it. In the lead-up to the Second World War, Auden's snow, disfiguring the public statues, evokes the disfigurement of public art and sculpture that has characterised so many human wars: the chiselling of genitals and noses and heads from marble, the criminal melting down of bronze and gold, the dynamiting of carved rock faces, the burning of books, the silencing of music. Auden also knows that his world, on the brink of war, has begun on a course that cannot be stilled, or over-awed, by the death of one poet, however important that poet (Leonard 1998, p. 105):

Far from his illness  
The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,  
The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays.

The mercury might sink at the news of Yeats' death, but the wolves are already off the leash and running, the dogs of Europe are barking.

Just as he subverts and queries the pathetic fallacy, Auden questions the efficacy of verse on the occasion of death (as had so many elegists before him, and as have so many since): '[P]oetry makes nothing happen', he asserts (Leonard 1998, p. 105). Yet like Spenser, in 'Astrophel', who condemns verses as 'vaine' and then almost immediately contradicts himself ('but verses are not vaine') (Spenser 1943, p. 180), so Auden, in the same stanza as he discounts poetry's efficacy, asserts that verse 'survives, / A way of happening, a mouth'. He knows that the fate of Yeats' poetry is in the hands of future generations – 'The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living' (Leonard 1998, p. 105). But his despair for *readers of poetry* seems less acute than his despair for the rest of humankind, so perhaps those 'guts' were as safe a place as anywhere for Yeats' legacy to be, in 1939. Some vestige of power and control remained in the hands of poet, and in the guts of the reader of poetry.

Sacks argues that for all the querying and reflexive poetic examination, for all the forces gathering in opposition to the genre, particularly since the First World War, modern elegists have managed to construct a surviving ritual – and are able, in consequence, to offer consolation (1987, p. 307). Almost a decade after Sacks, Jahan Ramazani explores the extent to which elegy has altered in the modern western world – and asks whether it is even possible for the modern poet to attempt the form. His conclusion is that, however resentfully, reproachfully and grudgingly the modern poet approaches the task of elegising, the form has somehow survived. Even the 'most cumbersome of elegiac topoi', such as the pathetic fallacy, Oedipal submission, and poetic inheritance, can be remade. Elegy as a genre, however 'out of its time' it seems to be, can be reclaimed (Ramazani 1994, p. 360).

Ramazani writes of the recompense, for the poet, that comes from the making of a poem, the redirection of affection from the dead to the ‘brilliant artefact’ that is in some measure a replacement for the individual it mourns (Freud’s detachment of the libido). He does, however, distinguish a shift over the centuries, arguing that to the extent that traditional elegy was an art of saving, the modern elegy is what Elizabeth Bishop called the ‘art of losing’ (Ramazani 1994, pp. 3-4).

I contend, on the contrary, and will demonstrate in the pages that follow, that elegy, traditional or otherwise, pastoral or otherwise, has long – perhaps always – been simultaneously an exercise in the art of losing and the art of preservation. I contend that even elegy which offers up the traditional consolations of eternal life and eventual reunion of those sundered by death, is at its heart about relinquishment, just as, paradoxically, elegy that is most stridently dismissive of traditional consolations, is about preservation.

That is not to say that the verse of the modern elegist is not informed and inflected by challenges different in nature or scale to those confronting earlier elegists. The mass deaths occasioned by global war, the moral catastrophe of the Holocaust, the cruel denial of the basic right to grieve for a dead lover that was experienced by so many during the early decades of AIDS – such circumstances have given rise to a kind of *anti-elegiac* verse. Dylan Thomas’s ‘Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London’ is sometimes held up as an example of this. So, too, are Holocaust elegies by poets including Geoffrey Hill. This is not the kind of elegy that is the primary focus of this research. Nor is the psychologically conflicted mourning of Sylvia Plath, though it would be easy to see in such poems as ‘Daddy’ (1981, pp. 222-224), Plath’s brutal farewell of the father who had died when she was a child, evidence of a fundamental shift in the genre in the 20th century: a rejection of consolation, a subversion of the conventions, a *refusal to mourn*. Does ‘Daddy’ even qualify as elegy? I

think, under the broad definition I adopted at the outset, it must, but it is elegy on the fringe of this exegesis's concerns, because it is written from such a perspective, and at such a pitch, that it does not deal with the commonality of grief, but with something apart, extreme, ungoverned and perhaps incapable of resolution.

I am bolstered in this conviction that Plath's poem is an outlier by the fact that for every 'Daddy' to confound the reader and suggest that elegy may have irrevocably altered, there is a poem like 'The Strand at Lough Beg'. In this poem, Seamus Heaney's elegy for Colum McCartney, a victim of Ireland's sectarian violence, the dead man, ambushed by a roadside, is farewelled as gently and as ritually as was the infant brother Heaney mourns in 'Mid-Term Break', or the mother by whose deathbed he bears witness in 'Clearances'.

It is not that Heaney ignores the politics or the horror: they are central. But he comes back to what is arguably elegy's main purpose – to mourn. In 'The Strand at Lough Beg', Heaney imagines the brutal moment of the ambush, the faked roadblock, the red lamp swinging, the 'tailing headlights / That pulled out suddenly and flagged you down / Where you weren't known and far from what you knew' (Heaney 1999, p. 145). But then, the death is reimagined: gentle cattle graze, up to their bellies in mist. Heaney and McCartney are making their way through a field of squeaking sedge (1999, p.146):

I turn because the sweeping of your feet  
Has stopped behind me, to find you on your knees  
With blood and roadside muck in your hair and eyes,  
Then kneel in front of you in brimming grass  
And gather up cold handfuls of the dew  
To wash you, cousin. I dab you clean with moss  
Fine as the drizzle out of a low cloud.  
I lift you under the arms and lay you flat.  
With rushes that shoot green again, I plait  
Green scapulars to wear over your shroud.

Here again are Pan's rushes, and the vegetation god, shooting green again, fashioned into Christian scapular.

There is grief here, and the despair that comes from pointless and anonymous killing. But this poem is remote in its poetic strategies and in its effect from 'Daddy'. Such an elegy as Plath's, with its appropriation of fascistic imagery to farewell a man who had died when Plath was a child, and its picture of deep, remembered dysfunctionality, is *exceptional*, rather than characteristic of the elegy written in the modern, secular world for lost family, lost friends, lost loves. Plath's poem begins and ends in the following ways (1981, pp. 222-224):

You do not do, you do not do  
Any more, black shoe  
In which I have lived like a foot  
For thirty years, poor and white,  
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo ...

... There's a stake in your fat black heart  
And the villagers never liked you.  
They are dancing and stamping on you.  
They always knew it was you.  
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

Plath's is *not* a model of healthy mourning, which may evidence anger and dispute but which progresses ultimately to something resembling acceptance. Instead, she reminds us that some griefs are overwhelming and irredeemable, some wounds beyond healing, some poetry beyond containment. However, the fact that there remains the *possibility* of healthy mourning in the contemporary world – however provisional some of that mourning may be – is evidenced by Seamus Heaney, Peter Porter and many others, all of them poets impelled by the urgency of the moment and the intensity of grief, who have responded with the unscrewing of a pen cap or a lifting of the laptop lid. These are poets who have continued to be like the 'mouth' of Auden's poem, through which the unutterable is spoken.

## Chapter 3

### Elegy as performative utterance

*The nobleness of grief is gone –  
Ah, leave us not the fret alone.*

(Matthew Arnold, 'Stanzas from the Grand Chartreuse')

One of my aims is to determine whether elegy can claim to be what in linguistics is termed a 'speech act', a 'performative utterance' that performs the 'work of mourning' described in the previous chapter.

A secondary aim, flowing from the first, is to explore whether the performative power of elegy, employed in the service of the work of mourning, helps give the genre its consolatory power. For I cannot help but be convinced that the persistence of elegy into our increasingly secular age demonstrates that the genre's power transcends any explicitly consolatory faith-based content (in the form of assurances about eternal life, heavenly reward or the eventual reunion of loved ones). Elegy's power persists, even in the seemingly anti-consolatory, self-consciously anti-elegiac elegy of the 20th and 21st centuries.

The first writer to articulate the idea that certain statements could be regarded as performative – utterances that perform the action to which they refer – was the mid-20th-century linguist J.L. Austin, in his 1955 collection of lectures, *How to do things with words* (1975). An everyday example of a performative utterance is the moment in a modern, western-tradition marriage ceremony when a celebrant states that by the power vested in him/her, he/she pronounces two individuals joined in marriage. Legally (and perhaps also spiritually and socially) the utterance does not simply *describe* the union, it *creates* the union. Without the ritual utterance of the words, there is no union. Similarly, if an individual owes an

acquaintance money, and utters the words, 'I promise to pay you back the money tomorrow', he or she is not just *describing* a promise, but performing the act of promising. The utterance is the act – in some jurisdictions a legally binding act.

Of course, many a promise to pay back money turns out to be un-kept. That is why Austin argued that while the *utterance* itself was critical to the 'performance' of the act, it was not necessarily the *only* thing needed in order for a statement to be successfully performative. Commonly, other actions – physical or mental or spoken – were needed to complete the process (1975, pp. 14-15). Austin called these 'felicities', and said they were needed, in addition to the words themselves, for a performative utterance to be successful, or 'happy'. These felicities included sincerity, procedural correctness and so on. In the same way, certain 'infelicities' – misapplications, misexecutions, misinvocations, misfires, insincerities and abuses – could cause a performative utterance to fail.

Austin's proposed creation of a new linguistic category of performative utterance was in part a counter to, and confrontation of, the arguments of the logical positivists, who argued that all statements could be verified, whether they were analytic (true by definition: for example, 'all bachelors are unmarried') or synthetic (proved true or false by observation or experience: for example, 'my house is currently painted yellow'). The performative, Austin argued, was a category of utterance that, unlike a 'constative' utterance, which was capable of being proven true or false, had no inherent truth or falsity, since it described nothing (and could not therefore be verified). Instead, it was an utterance that acted upon the world (1975, p. 5).

Consider, for example, the constative statement 'the sky is blue'. It is descriptively true or false – depending, perhaps, on whether it is clear or overcast, day or night, midday or sunset. Compare this with the performative statement, 'I now pronounce you man and wife', uttered by a celebrant or priest, in the course of a marriage ceremony. It cannot be true or false,

though it *can* be performed ‘successfully’ (by a celebrant with the appropriate credentials) or ‘unsuccessfully’ (if, for example, the groom or bride happens to be a bigamist, or the priest has been defrocked).

Significantly, Austin explicitly excluded literature from his definition of performative statements. He believed that language used by a writer in a poem (or by an actor on a stage) was not language used ‘seriously’, but language parasitic upon normal use – an etiolation of language (Austin 1975, p. 22). While he did not articulate in detail the reasons for his dismissal of the notion that literature could be performative (though he repeated the charge almost a dozen times over the course of his lectures on the subject of performative utterance), it is probable that he simply did not believe that such uses of language could fulfil the preconditions he established for performativity, possessing the necessary ‘felicities’ such as the need for sincerity, and the requirement that the participants be properly qualified.

Austin demanded that where the act being performed presumed certain thoughts or feelings on the part of those involved, then the participants must truly *have* those thoughts or those feelings (1975, p. 15). At one level, this makes perfect sense. An actor playing the part of a priest in a movie (for example) could not be said to be *actually performing* a real marriage ceremony, however fully he enters into the part, however convincing an actor he might be. He is neither qualified (ordained) nor sincere (truly intending to bind his fellow actors in matrimony). For their part, his fellow actors are similarly insincere in their intention to marry, however sincere they might be in their desire to convey the *appearance* of that intention to cinema-goers. For Austin, intention was essential to performativity, and in the cinematic scenario above there could be no true intention to perform the act (of marriage). The participants are merely personas, or players.

On the other hand, Austin's blanket rejection of the performative potential of poetry ('Walt Whitman does not seriously incite the eagle of liberty to soar,' he wrote) (1975, p. 104) seems to overlook the fact that a great many of the utterances he *would* have regarded as performative, especially those that perform religious actions – marriage vows, funeral liturgies, masses of committal, holy communion and so on – are essentially, and even explicitly, poetic.

Consider, for example, the Words of Institution spoken during the Roman Catholic Eucharist:

Take this, all of you, and eat of it:  
for **this is my body** which will be given up for you.  
Take this, all of you, and drink from it:  
for **this is the chalice of my blood,**  
the blood of the new and eternal covenant  
which will be poured out for you and for many  
for the forgiveness of sins.  
Do this in memory of me.

With the utterance of these words, Roman Catholics believe, the sacrament is enacted. Indeed, of the words above, the eight in bold are technically sufficient for the enactment. And even when excised from the whole –

This is my body  
This is my blood

– they employ devices of poetry: repetition, rhythm and arrangement into lines.

The ritual use of the eight words dates from the 1439 Council of Florence and a document called *Decree for the Armenians* (part of the *Bull Exsultate Deo*). The Decree reads, in part, '... in virtue of those words, the substance of bread is changed into the body of Christ and the substance of wine into his blood' (1439, n.p.). It is true that the Roman Catholic insistence that this transformation is *actual*, not simply *representational*, has been modified somewhat by other Christian denominations. Anglicans, for example, regard the bread and wine of the Eucharist as visible signs of the things signified (the body and blood of Christ). Nevertheless,

the roots of the ritual are common ones. As performative utterances go, it is fairly significant: body transformed into bread, blood into wine. *And* it is poetry.

Furthermore, in relation to performative utterances such as pronouncements of marriage, naming ceremonies, sentencing, and so on, the individual making the utterance (performing the act), can surely also be regarded as a persona, a player. A sentencing judge does not wander the streets handing out jail terms to jaywalkers. The performative utterance of sentencing takes place on its own stage, with its own costumes and scripts.

P.F. Strawson, writing about intentionality in performative utterance (Fann 1969, p. 391) says,

... for the enterprise [the performative utterance] to be possible at all, there must exist, or [the speaker] must find, means of making the intention clear. If there exists any conventional linguistic means of doing so, the speaker has both a right to use, and a motive for using, those means.

There seems no question that a poet, in asserting 'I mourn' through the poetic lines of elegy, is doing precisely the thing to which he or she refers. One might question the intensity of the emotion, certainly, and even the quality of the poetry, but it is hard to see how one could simply deny the intention of the poet, or the seriousness of the utterance, or the poet's right or motive for that utterance.

Interestingly, while Strawson is adamant about the requirement for a clear intention on the part of the speaker, he is more relaxed when it comes to the identity of the *audience* – something that has relevance to the question of whether elegy can be rightly considered a performative utterance. After all, who, in elegiac terms, is the poet's interlocutor? Who hears the poet make the statement, 'I mourn'? Is the dead person, in some ritualised sense, expected to hear? (So it would often seem, from the direct form of address adopted in many elegies.) Or is it the community of fellow mourners? Or the community of *future* mourners unknown to

the poet – the poetry-reading public that is drawn to an elegy decades, centuries or millennia after it was written? Perhaps it is all of these and also the poet himself or herself – his or her own interlocutor, consoler and consoled – engaged jointly in the work of mourning. Strawson says it is sometimes not possible to isolate among the participants in *any* procedure involving a performative utterance (whether trial, marriage, game, bet, pledge, naming) the particular audience member to whom the utterance could be said to be addressed (Fann 1969, p. 396). He cites the example of an umpire declaring a baseball strike, or a cricket umpire declaring a batsman out. To whom might such a performative utterance be directed? The batsman? The team? The spectators in the stands? Perhaps even, in our own day, the billions viewing via live streaming?

Paradoxically, it is Austin's very determination to prove, via the new classification of performativity, that verifiability – or truth – is not the *only* important feature of sincere language use, that permits an argument for poetry to be included among the uses of language that *can be* considered performative. It is perhaps unsurprising that a theorist who championed a functional use of language, while recognising that such language is not about verifiable truth, should find his ideas taken up and developed by scholars and philosophers interested in the function of literary texts. After all, one does not look to poetry for literal truth – merely for truthfulness (sometimes not even that). As E. Warwick Slinn observes, literary and poetic texts are, by their very nature, relegated to secondary significance by positivist belief systems (1999, p. 60) and Jan Mukarovsky goes so far as to argue that the function of poetic language – the expression of an aesthetic effect – is the direct *opposite* of the function of language as propounded by the positivists, for whom the function of language is to make expression more precise (1976, p. 9).

As Austin found in due course, his strict distinction between constative and performative statements did not always hold. In particular (and of special interest here), performatives often invoke reference to their physical circumstances and social context. This renders each performative utterance a historical act – pointing, as Slinn (1999, pp. 60-61) argues, to the inseparability of reference and constitution in language acts:

The result is that the performative has become an increasingly diverse term, developing the sense, since and through Austin, of a language act which does something with words, uniting text and social context on the one hand, while separating speaker from speech on the other. We now have the somewhat amorphous concept of performativity – an interrelating complex of performer, act, audience, and context.

The concept of performative utterance has thus moved a considerable distance from the linguistic, social and ideological space to which Austin assigned it. Theorists, including Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler and Louis Althusser, have been among those who have significantly developed the notion of performativity and used it to explore the use and the power of language. Along the way they have challenged some of Austin's limitations on the application of the term 'performative'.

Derrida, for example, argues (1982) that rather than striving to distinguish between 'serious' and 'non-serious' utterances, a better criterion by which to assess the potential of an utterance to be classed as performative might be 'iterability'. By this he means the capacity of signs (words and texts) to be repeated or re-used (cited) in new situations and contexts, acquiring and grafting new meanings in the process. By treating words and texts as 'iterable' Derrida challenges the structuralist view that structures of meaning are stable, universal and ahistorical (Balkin 1995, p. 4). For Derrida, the use of a sign or text in a new context produces new meanings that are similar to, but not identical to, previous understandings. He also proposes that the range of statements that might be classified as performative need not be as limited as Austin asserted, but might include texts (including poems) that are made up of

chains of iterable marks. In his essay 'Signature, Event, Context' (1982 p. 326) Derrida argues that iterability, or citationality, is actually essential to the success of a performative utterance.

Could a performative statement succeed if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable statement, in other words if the expressions I use to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming to an iterable model, and therefore if they were not identifiable in a way as 'citation'?

While conceding that, by Austin's standards, there might be performative utterances of greater inherent purity than others (1982, p. 326), Derrida makes room on the spectrum for other forms of utterance than the ones nominated by Austin (1982, p. 325).

[I]s not what Austin excludes as anomalous, exceptional, 'nonserious' that is, citation (on the stage, in a poem, or in a soliloquy), the determined modification of a general citationality or rather, a general iterability without which there would not even be a 'successful' performative?

While it may be argued that all literature is citational to a degree, poetry, by virtue of its self-referential nature and the importance of devices such as allusion, homage and intertextuality, is citational to an exceptional degree. And elegy, which draws so consistently on familiar tropes and conventions, is arguably citational and intertextual to such an extent that it occupies a class of its own.

The citationality of elegy takes a number of forms. Elegy self-consciously places itself in a literary tradition that dates to humankind's earliest known writings. It employs (challenges, breaks apart, reinvents) even today, imagery, tropes and conventions dating at least to the ancient Greeks. These are devices that join modern elegists to a fraternity of fellow mourners – and more specifically fellow mourning *poets* – a most ancient fraternity. It frequently employs these devices overtly and self-consciously.

Sometimes the citationality is extremely explicit, as with Swinburne's adoption (1940 p. 225) for the title of his elegy for Baudelaire, of the closing words of Catullus's 1st-century BC

elegy for his brother: *ave atque vale* – hail and farewell (Catullus 1971, p. 213). Just as explicit, in our own time, is Canadian poet Anne Carson’s minutely detailed deconstruction of the same Catullus poem in *NOX*, her elegiac writings after the death of her own brother.

Similarly overt are Judith Wright’s invocation, in ‘Rosina Alcona to Julius Brenzaida’ of Emily Bronte’s ‘R. Alcona to J. Brenzaida’ (Gilbert 2001, pp. 236-237, 243-244) and Ginsberg’s reference to the ‘last triumphant stanzas’ of Shelley’s ‘Adonais’, in his elegy for his mother, ‘Kaddish’ (2010, p. 36).

At other times the citation is in the form of the repetition or invocation of a stock of common images – for example Milton’s referencing in ‘Lycidas’ of a variation on the Apollo-Daphne myth, described in Chapter 2, or Dryden (‘To the Memory of Mr Oldham’), Tennyson (‘In Memoriam’) and Swinburne (‘Ave Atque Vale’) each evoking the idea of life as a footrace, in which the ‘winner’ is the first to die, drawing upon the story of Nisus as told in Virgil’s *The Aeneid*. Citation can also take the form of the repeated employment of common poetic conventions over long periods. One such convention that has been employed in elegiac poetry from the very earliest times is the pathetic fallacy – the conceit that a mortal loss is so profound that nature itself is plunged into mourning.

Composed about 2000 BCE, one of humanity’s earliest known pieces of literature, and one of the first surviving explorations of human loss and mourning, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, invokes the pathetic fallacy (Kovacs 1989, p. 69):

May the pasture lands shriek in mourning as if it were your mother ... [m]ay the holy river ulaja, along whose banks we grandly used to stroll, mourn you.

Writing in the 3rd century BCE, Theocritus, in his ‘1st Idyll’, depicts the upheaval to the natural order occasioned by the death of Daphnis (Edmonds 1912, n.p.):

When Daphnis died the foxes wailed and the wolves they wailed full sore,  
The lion from the greenward wept when Daphnis was no more.

And later ...

Bear violets now ye briers, ye thistles violets too;  
Daffodilly may hang on the juniper, and all things go askew;  
Pines may grow figs now Daphnis dies, and hind tear hound if she will,  
And the sweet nightingale be outsung i' the dale by the scritch-owl from the hill.

In the 1st century BCE, Virgil, in his '5th Eclogue', writes (Virgil 1990, p. 12):

... no beast ate or drank at all from sadness:  
Even Afric lions roared their grief,  
forest and hill keened Daphnis dead.

The evocative power of the pathetic fallacy has been summoned by poets from every period. And in every period, new meanings and nuances are grafted. In 'Daphnaida', written in the late 16th century to mourn the death of Douglas Howard, Spenser summons the mourning powers of nature, *blaming* nature for his loss and conjuring a world contrary to rhythm and sense (Spenser 2009, n.p.):

Let birds be silent on the naked spray,  
And shady woods resound with dreadful yells:  
Let streaming floods their hastie courses stay,  
And parching drouth drie vp the christall wells;  
Let th'earth be barren and bring foorth no flowres,  
And th'ayre be fild with noyse of dolefull knells,  
And wandring spirits walke vntimely howres.  
And Nature nurse of euery liuing thing,  
Let rest her selfe from her long wearinesse,  
And cease henceforth things kindly forth to bring,  
But hideous monsters full of vglinesse:  
For she it is, that hath me done this wrong,  
No nurse, but Stepdame, cruell, mercilesse,  
Weepe Shepheard weepe to make my vndersong.

In the early decades of the 19th century Shelley revives the convention in 'Adonais', his elegy for Keats. The very oceans mourn, the wild winds sob their dismay, dew turns to tears (Shelley 1847, p. 130):

Grief made the young Spring wild, and she threw down  
Her kindling buds, as if she Autumn were,  
Or they dead leaves; since her delight is flown,  
For whom should she have waked the sullen year?

In the 20th century Paul Monette reinvents and grafts further meanings to the convention in ‘Gardenias’, one of his elegies for his partner Roger Horwitz. Here, the poet observes nature acting out of season to deliver consolation. The gardenias, loved by both the poet and the man he mourns, have put forth unseasonal blooms for the funeral, but the pretence cannot last (Monette 1988 p. 224/1342):

I promise you all the last gardenias Rog  
but they can't go on like this they've stopped they know  
the only garden we'll ever be is us and it's  
all winter they tried they tried but oh the ice  
of my empty arms my poor potato dreams

Each citation of the pathetic fallacy evokes and builds upon the sum of earlier citations, so that by the time we read Ted Hughes, a decade later, in 1998, describing the wolves in the nearby zoo, howling for his dead wife, Sylvia Plath, we are witnesses to, and partakers of, a ritual that encompasses each of those earlier utterances, and future utterances too (Hughes 1998, p. 183):

Wolves consoled us. Two or three times each night  
For minutes on end  
They sang. They had found where we lay.  
And the dingos, and the Brazilian-maned wolves –  
All lifted their voices together  
With the grey Northern pack.

The wolves lifted us in their long voices.  
They wound and enmeshed us  
In their wailing for you, their mourning for us ...

Use of the pathetic fallacy by elegists writing from the earliest times to the present is clearly citational. Its use amounts to a ritual formulation that instantly places the poem in a ceremonial space, evoking and invoking the elegiac tradition and proclaiming each fresh elegy to be a part of that tradition, yet grafting new meanings (for example, while Spenser was instructing nature to revolt, Shelley was describing a nature already in revolt, and Hughes

extended the convention again, so that the wolves mourned not merely for his wife, but for the surviving husband and children).

The pathetic fallacy is just one of a number of conventions adopted by writers of elegiac poetry that show the importance to the genre of citationality, and that lend force to elegy's claim to be a performative utterance. Other commonly employed conventions through the centuries include the invocation of gods or muses, including references to the vegetation god; the invocation of the mother figure; birth and rebirth; floral symbols of loss; the seasons; funeral processions; and bodies of water (the sea and rivers). Each particular use of such conventions serves to place a poem within the elegiac tradition. Collectively, and over time, these uses of convention do more. They impart a sense of ceremony and ritual to the act of elegiac creation by the poet and to future acts of reading and re-reading within the elegiac tradition of which the text becomes a part.

The elegiac convention of referencing a vegetation god, like the use of the pathetic fallacy, dates to ancient works and each iteration invokes the prior works and imposes its own new meanings. Frazer, in *The Golden Bough* (1993, p. 325), traces the progression of the myth of the vegetation god through millennia and cultures.

Under the names of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, and Attis, the peoples of Egypt and Western Asia represented the yearly decay and revival of life, especially of vegetable life, which they personified as a god who annually died and rose again from the dead.

Frazer identifies an early and influential iteration of such stories in the myth of the Babylonian Tammuz, the young lover of the mother goddess Ishtar. Every year, Tammuz died and every year Ishtar journeyed in search of him to 'the land from which there is no returning, to the house of darkness, where dust lies on door and bolt'. During each of Ishtar's absences, men and beasts forgot to reproduce. Life itself was at risk of extinction – a striking instance, incidentally, of the pathetic fallacy. Each year the queen of the 'infernal regions' allowed

Ishtar and Tammuz to return to the upper world, only for the death to be replayed the following year (Frazer 1993, p. 326).

The Greek myth of Adonis referenced by some elegists, including Shelley, in 'Adonais', is also, in some of its aspects, the myth of the vegetation god. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, conceals the infant Adonis in a chest, which she leaves in the keeping of Persephone, the queen of the nether world. Persephone opens the chest, is smitten by the beauty of the baby and refuses to return him to Aphrodite. Aphrodite descends into hell in an attempt to ransom Adonis. Zeus intervenes and decrees that Adonis should live with Aphrodite in the upper world for part of the year and with Persephone in the nether world for part of the year (thus being essentially re-born to life each year). Adonis is later gored in the groin by a wild boar while out hunting in the upper world (Frazer 1993, p. 327). In Bion's poetic rendering of this event, 'Lament for Adonis', the blood from Adonis's mortal wound drips into the soil and roses grow from the spot (Edmonds 1912, n.p.), conferring upon Adonis the kind of transformed 'immortality' found in the Apollo-Daphne and Pan-Syrinx myths outlined in Chapter 2.

The citation of the myth of the vegetation god (and the myth of Adonis in particular) by elegists across the centuries, from Bion's 'Lament for Adonis' in the 1st century BCE to Shelley's revival of the myth in his elegy for Keats almost two millennia later, is testimony to its resonance and relevance for the elegist who has embarked on the work of mourning. For all the horror of his recurring death, the vegetation god is a potent symbol of renewal and rebirth. His rebirth is manifest in Ted Hughes' (1998, p. 128) remembrance of Sylvia Plath, cutting daffodils in the last spring before her death:

Wind-wounds, spasms from the dark earth,  
With their odourless metals,  
A flamy purification of the deep grave's stony cold  
As if ice had a breath –

This rebirth continues every spring after Plath's suicide (p. 128):

Every March since they have lifted again  
Out of the same bulbs, the same  
Baby-cries from the thaw,  
Ballerinas too early for music, shiverers  
In the draughty wings of the year.

The vegetation god dies seasonally and is reborn through the combined intervention of the gods and human beings (gardeners, poets, believers). For Christian elegists reviving the older pastoral traditions, the link with the promised resurrection proved irresistible. Sacks conjectures that invoking the vegetation gods allows the elegist to convey the impression that human beings, far from being subject to the remorseless march of time and season, can orchestrate such natural processes as death and rebirth (1987, p. 21). The endless rolling seasons, with their promise of a spring to follow each winter's dead months, could never quite give sufficient grounds for optimism regarding eternal life for people acutely conscious of their mortality, *unless*, argues Sacks, the seasonal progression was joined to some degree of human agency or control. The myth of the vegetation god provides that agency. Without it, we would be left with Gerard Manley Hopkins' arguably bleak counsel in 1880 to the young girl, Margaret, grieving at the falling of autumn leaves, in 'Spring and Fall' (1983, p. 50):

It is the blight man was born for,  
It is Margaret you mourn for.

Invocation of the vegetation god, combined with the pathetic fallacy, permits the elegist to relegate nature to the role of fellow mourner (rather than an inexorable and oblivious force) – even, in some cases, a mourner whose grief is *summoned*, as if by a god or a wizard, by the elegist himself or herself (as Milton bids the aramanthus to shed its petals and the daffodils to fill with tears in 'Lycidas', and as Spenser summons the pathetic fallacy in 'Daphnaida', quoted above).

Invocation of the vegetation god can also be regarded as a device for ritualising and containing grief – giving it direction and delimiting its duration. The vegetation god is mourned seasonally, since his death and rebirth are annual events. Those who mourn him in proper season perform a kind of propitiatory act, but it is an act confined to its appropriate season, a mourning that will not consume all the months of the year, or all the years of a life. As Bion instructs (perhaps rather insensitively) in the final lines of ‘Lament for Adonis’:  
‘Give over thy wailing for to-day, Cytherea, and beat not now thy breast any more; thou needs wilt wail again and weep again, come another year’ (Edmonds 1912, n.p.).

Sacks finds further symbolism in the myth of the vegetation god, linking the myth to the symbolic castration that he argues is part of the ‘work’ of mourning. He points out that the vegetation gods often suffer deaths or injury that are somehow linked to sexual potency or impotence: Persephone is raped; Adonis is gored in the groin; Atthis castrates himself; Orpheus is torn apart by women (Sacks 1987, p. 27).

The immortality suggested by nature’s regenerative power rests on a principle of recurrent fertility ... [t]he vegetation deity, and especially his or her sexual power, must be made to disappear and return. Hence the specifically sexual or castrative aspects of the deaths.

Citatoriality of the kind described above – iteration across the ages – is one of the core features of elegy, a feature that imbues it with an unmistakable sense of ritual and that strengthens the case for regarding the genre as performative utterance. But citatoriality is just *one* of the claims elegy can lay to performativity. Another, which will be dealt with as a special case in the next chapter, is the frequency with which elegists employ the performative act of naming, and occasionally *re*-naming, of the dead, and the particular role this can play in the successful work of mourning. There are also specific structural poetic devices that are commonly employed in elegy, which play a performative function – one of the most notable of which is the repetition of words, phrases or figures, helping to transform the elegy into

ceremony. Examples of effective use of repetition include Spenser's poignant 'Daphnaida', from the late 16th century, and Walt Whitman's 'When Lilacs Last in the Door-yard Bloomed', written after the assassination of the American President, Abraham Lincoln.

Rhythm and repetition are combined to hypnotic and incantatory effect in 'Daphnaida' (Spenser 2009, n.p.):

I hate the heauen, because it doth withould  
Me from my loue, and eke my loue from me;  
I hate the earth, because it is the mould  
Of fleshly slime and fraile mortalitie;  
I hate the fire, because to nought it flyes,  
I hate the Ayre, because sighes of it be,  
I hate the Sea, because it teares supplies.  
I hate the day, because it lendeth light  
To see all things, and not my loue to see;  
I hate the darknesse and the dreary night,  
Because they breed sad balefulnesse in mee:  
I hate all times, because all times doo fly  
So fast away, and may not stayed bee,  
But as a speedie post that passeth by.

The poem is mantra-like in its determined distress. This is disconsolation at its most extreme, and yet the methodical repetition of 'I hate, I hate, I hate' is simultaneously almost soothing in its hymnal quality.

Whitman's (1950) slower, more stately and less anxious employment of repetition is equally devastating, but also equally ritually consoling. The slow-tolling bells, the muffled creak of carriage wheels, are almost audible (1950, p. 259):

O powerful western fallen star!  
O shades of night—O moody, tearful night!  
O great star disappear'd—O the black murk that hides the star!  
O cruel hands that hold me powerless—O helpless soul of me!  
O harsh surrounding cloud that will not free my soul.

And again, a few stanzas later, at an even more sombre, processional pace (p. 260):

With the pomp of the inloop'd flags, with the cities draped in black,

With the show of the States themselves, as of crape-veil'd women, standing,  
With processions long and winding, and the flambeaus of the night,  
With the countless torches lit – with the silent sea of faces, and the unbared heads,  
With the waiting depot, the arriving coffin, and the sombre faces,  
With dirges through the night, with the thousand voices rising strong and solemn;  
With all the mournful voices of the dirges, pour'd around the coffin ...

The deployment of such repeated words and phrases in elegy have the effect of '... controlling the expression of grief while also keeping that expression in motion ...' and creating a sense of ceremony (Sacks 1987, p. 23). In a poem such as Spenser's 'Nouember' eclogue, the cumulative effect of repetition – the 'O' (also used in Whitman's elegy for Lincoln) – is positively chant-like. The poem becomes an incantation. The words become ceremony (Spenser 1888, pp. 145-146):

O heavy Herse!  
Let streaming Tears be poured out in store:  
O careful Verse!

...

O heavy Herse!  
Break we our Pipes, that shrill'd as loud as Lark:  
O careful Verse!

...

O heavy Herse!  
Now is time to die: Nay, time was long ygo.  
O careful Verse!

Similarly, John Donne, in 'The First Anniversary', repeatedly intones, almost brokenly, 'Shee, shee is dead; shee's dead ...' (1967, p. 204).

There are echoes, in these examples, of the antiphon of western Christian liturgy – the lines uttered by a congregation to punctuate and complete texts uttered by the clergy, and the phrases chanted by one choir in response to another. There is repetition of another sort, too, which helps heighten the ceremonial and citational aspects of elegy. This is the explicit acknowledgment, within the text of many elegies, that elegising is 'something we do' when

confronted with mortal loss – moreover, that it is something that *poets* do, a rite that joins them to a fraternity of poets down the ages who have responded to loss by writing a certain kind of poetry.

Such an acknowledgment is present in the opening lines of Milton's 'Lycidas' (1993, p. 56):

Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more  
Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere,  
I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude,  
And with forced fingers rude,  
Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year

It is present too in Shelley's 'Adonais' (1847, p. 126):

Most musical of mourners, weep again!  
Lament anew.

'Once more'. 'Begin again'. 'Yet again'. Sing and lament anew. Through such phrases, elegists invoke a sense of standing ritual – even if it is a ritual whose full history and meaning and formalities can only be dimly perceived, or whose efficacy, only ever partial, must finally be an article of faith. This confirms that amid the profound helplessness that accompanies human loss, there is consolation to be found in giving oneself over to the idea that there are set rituals to be performed – rituals that, in being performed, are also effective. Almost by definition, if this is the 'work' of mourning it needs to *work* (in the sense of functioning efficaciously). And as we have seen in the previous chapter, such rituals tend to be effective, even in the absence of a pre-existing confidence in their efficacy. By ceremony, by ritual and by recourse to the conventions described above, personal and particular loss can frequently be transformed – almost naturalised – and, like the seasons, however brutal and however long in duration, can be endured and survived.

Judith Butler argues that the ritual nature of performative utterance carries the implication that *this* moment of utterance is always informed by *prior* (and future) ritual utterances. 'Who

speaks when convention speaks?’ she asks. ‘In some sense it is an inherited set of voices, an echo of others who speak as the “I”’ (Butler 1997, p. 25). The idea of an echo claiming the linguistic standing of a performative utterance does not sit altogether comfortably with Austin’s early theorising about speech acts, with its implied focus on the singular occasion of the utterance. But Derrida, Butler and others have taken the exploration of performativity some distance away from any formulation that involves the necessary, conscious and intentional *presence* of the speaker and receiver of the performative – and away from the assumption that any performative statement is self-contained at the instant of its performance and entirely consumed in the act of utterance (Derrida 2007, p. 25).

The emphasis Austin places on intentionality is a consequence of his concern with the issues of sincerity and authorisation, discussed earlier. But Austin himself *also* requires that performative utterances contain recognisable codifications – ritual words that enact the performance, whether that performance take the form of the solemnisation of a marriage, the taking of an oath of allegiance or the naming of a boat. And the very existence of these ritual formulations of words is evidence that a performative utterance *does* have an existence beyond the moment of its utterance – that it is part of a tradition, that it contains within itself *past* and *future* utterances, from which it draws some of its authority and power. Slinn (1999, pp. 63-64) writes that a performative utterance engages ‘the real’ by performing its own meaning while at the same time ‘reaching outside its linguistic content into context or the process of production, engaging and constituting an audience, a witness, a cultural ideology, through the matrices of reiterated practices’.

Louis Althusser argues that the ‘ideology’ or belief expressed through and acted out by rituals – whether political, religious, patriotic or social – is itself a *product* of the enactment of the ritual. Thus, he turns on its head the more usual assumption that rituals *arise from*, or are

*products of*, ideology (Althusser 1971, p. 158). If we extend Althusser's argument to the realm of bereavement, we might arrive at the following formulation: enact the rituals of consolation, and consolation will come. Mourn, and the work of mourning will be done. This notion is explored further in Chapter 5, in which the role of conscious fictions in the consolatory power of elegiac performativity is examined. First, however, it is worth reflecting on the extent to which contemporary understandings of performativity are inflected by Althusser's writings about the ideological role of the performative utterance, and what implications this influence may bring to bear on a study of the performative aspects of elegy.

In arriving at his stance that ideology or beliefs are products of the enactment of ritual, Althusser draws on the observations of the 17th-century Catholic philosopher Blaise Pascal, who argues that the source of religious belief is not reason alone, nor inspiration, but a combination of these, along with 'custom' – by which he means the performance of the rituals associated with a particular belief system. In *Pensées*, Pascal (2008, p. 252) writes,

Proofs only convince the mind. Custom is the source of our strongest and most believed proofs ...[custom] which, without violence, without art, without argument, makes us believe things, and inclines all our powers to this belief, so that our soul falls naturally into it.

For Judith Butler, the performative utterance is key to this process, involving an individual in an ideological ritual, regardless of whether the individual holds a prior and authenticating belief in that ideology (Butler 1997, p. 24).

Does elegy, as performative utterance, have an ideological function, in the sense suggested by Althusser? Certainly there have been times when poetic genres or sub-genres have announced themselves in positive and unapologetic terms as ideological – in recent times, the dub

poetry<sup>2</sup> of exponents such as Linton Kwesi Johnson, or the ‘poetry of witness’ exemplified by Carolyn Forché, are explicitly so. And of course the same holds true elsewhere in the creative arts: think of the religious messaging embedded within iconography, speaking to a pre-literate population, or the ideological statements about private property inherent in the work of the graffiti artist. Consider the overtly political content of reggae music and the appeal to deep sentiments of superiority and entitlement that imbue the lyrics of national anthems.

Similarly, one can see that some of the social structures responsible for the production and dissemination of cultural products (including films and popular music) exercise an ideological function similar to that exercised by institutions such as ‘The State’ and ‘The Family’, which Althusser categorises as ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’. Consider, for example, the role mainstream cinema played in the blacklisting of the Hollywood Ten – the group of movie producers, writers and directors who appeared before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947 to account for their supposed communist sympathies and who were subsequently denied work in Hollywood – or the elements of mainstream American commercial radio that refused to play music recorded by the Dixie Chicks, after the band took a stance against the United States’ invasion of Iraq (CNN 2003). Cultural institutions of production and dissemination can and do play an overt ideological role at times. Elegy, as a genre, has been turned to ideological ends more than once. There have been periods when elegy has functioned ideologically, either reinforcing conventional positions or acting as a

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<sup>2</sup> Dub poetry emerged as a primarily oral tradition in Jamaica and England during the 1970s, influenced by the rhythms of reggae music. Its subjects are often political (Baldick 2008, p. 36).

counterweight against prevailing social paradigms. One such period was during the rise of Protestantism in Britain.

Wayland (2009) argues that in medieval times the relative rarity of elegy was, in part, a consequence of there being so many alternative mainstream cultural responses (usually religious) to death, so many *other* means by which people could speak directly to, and attempt to intercede on behalf of, the dead: masses, chantries, indulgences and so on – what Wayland calls the ‘massive apparatus of charitable intercession’ (p. 440). The rise of Protestantism, he argues, closed off some of these channels between the living and the dead. Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries, Edward VI’s law to dissolve chantries and Elizabeth I’s 39 Articles, which included direct attacks on Catholic traditions and beliefs relating to the dead (such as purgatory and pardons), all affected how individuals responded to human loss (Wayland 2009, p. 442). Wayland suggests that the proliferation of Renaissance elegy was, in part at least, a substitution for these now-banned intercessions, a replacement form of social mourning, ‘taking over the social if not the eschatological functions of the practices now rejected by Protestantism’ (p. 446). Similarly, Gibbons (2008) argues that poets like Spenser explored the power and potential of poetry to deliver the consolation that could no longer be delivered by the new, ‘authorised’ rituals of mourning, such as the streamlined 1559 Order for the Burial of the Dead (pp. 84-85). This is likely to be part of the reason Spenser and other poets of his period employ devices – such as repetition – that are so reminiscent of liturgical texts. Elegy, in this period, becomes more than simply a substitute form of social mourning. It also becomes a way of responding to and dealing with the doctrinal rigorism that had replaced other avenues of mourning. It frees poets to say what they might not dare to say otherwise. And in this sense, it has a clear ideological edge. In 1589, the (presumed) author of *The Arte of English Poesie*, George Puttenham, expresses the relief of being able to compose elegiac verse (Puttenham 1968, pp. 37-38):

Lamenting is altogether contrary to rejoicing, every man saith so, and yet it is a peece of joy to be able to lament with ease, and freely to poure forth a mans inward sorrowes and the greefs wherewith his mind is surcharged.

The use of elegy as a vehicle for attacks on a corrupt clergy (by Milton and others) was also a clear positioning of elegy in an ideological space. In 'Lycidas', Milton holds nothing back, putting in the mouth of St Peter a scarifying attack on the clergy – 'blind mouths' that scarce 'know how to hold / A sheep-hook, or have learned aught else the least / That to the faithful herdsman's art belongs' (1993, p. 59).

And when they list, their lean and flashy songs  
Grate on their scrannel pipes of wretched straw.  
The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed,  
But swoln with wind, and the rank mist they draw,  
Rot inwardly and foul contagion spread,  
Besides what the grim wolf with privy paw  
Daily devours apace, and nothing said.

The ferocity of the language is startling, but the outraged tone is perhaps understandable, when it is considered that just months before 'Lycidas' first appeared in print, the Puritans Prynne, Bastwick and Burton had been 'cut and branded' for sedition, after they published an outspoken attack on the clergy. Milton, with his Puritan sympathies, chooses a more oblique and euphemistic (though doubtless still risky) way to voice his concerns about the established church.

In other periods too, sub-genres of elegy have taken a decidedly ideological stance. Black American poets like Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer and Claude McKay have given voice to a sub-genre of lynch elegy, for example, while war elegy has played a potent ideological role over the past century. While there has been plenty of war elegy (from the First World War especially) that has romanticised death in battle, there is much (including much from that same war) that turns a bleaker eye upon the business of dying for one's country.

Ezra Pound is brutally blunt in 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberly' (Pound 1949 p. 64):

There died a myriad,  
And of the best, among them,  
For an old bitch gone in the teeth,  
For a botched civilization

Those he mourns have perished ‘pro patria’, certainly, but as Pound puts it, challenging Horace’s original poetic formulation, ‘*non “dulce”, non “et decor”*’, just ‘eye-deep in hell’ (1949, p. 64).

Similarly, the wastage of war is evoked viscerally in Yeats’ ‘In Memory of Major Robert Gregory’, which starts as a fond remembrance of departed friends of Yeats’s own vintage – men whose ‘breathless faces seem to look / Out of some old picture-book’. But the poem lurches sickeningly, midway, to lament the death in war of a young, talented Adonis, a death that quite cuts short Yeats’ comfortable, complacent, nostalgic contemplation of loss (Yeats 1961, p. 140):

I had thought, seeing how bitter is that wind  
That shakes the shutter, to have brought to mind  
All those that manhood tried, or childhood loved  
Or boyish intellect approved,  
With some appropriate commentary on each;  
Until imagination brought  
A fitter welcome; but a thought  
Of that late death took all my heart for speech.

Elegy’s continuing power in our age of growing secularism, by way of a century of global wars, is in part due to its capacity to be self-consciously *part* of a tradition, while simultaneously resisting that tradition, or even seeking to subvert it. Wallace Stevens’ ‘The Death of a Soldier’, written in 1918, conjures the pathetic fallacy only to highlight its fallaciousness – the soldier’s death is neither mourned nor memorialised – the clouds ‘go nevertheless in their direction’. Yet even as Stevens repudiates the efficacy of the conventions of elegy, the very act of his elegising releases the full, consolatory power of those same conventions. Notwithstanding the poet’s claims to the contrary, the nameless soldier *is*

mourned, by Stevens and by decades of readers who have absorbed the terrible, compact beauty of his verse (Stevens 2001, p. 124):

Life contracts and death is expected,  
As in a season of autumn.  
The soldier falls.

He does not become a three-days personage,  
Imposing his separation,  
Calling for pomp.

Death is absolute and without memorial,  
As in a season of autumn  
When the wind stops.

When the wind stops and, over the heavens,  
The clouds go, nevertheless,  
In their direction.

So too, more recently, Yusef Komunyakaa's elegy for the Vietnam War dead, 'Facing It', is simultaneously a questioning of the efficacy of memorialisation (and elegy), and a stunning proof of its efficacy. In this meditation on the Vietnam memorial, in Washington, members of the public, pilgrims to a communal shrine, are reflected in the polished black granite surfaces of the memorial, becoming players in a performance or obeisance, in a setting that is part hall-of-mirrors, part sepulchre, part chapel (Komunyakaa 2001, p. 235).

I turn  
this way—the stone lets me go.  
I turn that way—I'm inside  
the Vietnam Veterans Memorial  
again, depending on the light  
to make a difference.

A little later:

Names shimmer on a woman's blouse  
but when she walks away  
the names stay on the wall.

And finally:

A white vet's image floats  
closer to me, then his pale eyes

look through mine. I'm a window.  
He's lost his right arm  
inside the stone. In the black mirror  
a woman's trying to erase names:  
No, she's brushing a boy's hair.

There is much in this poem that is familiar from elegiac tradition: the procession of mourners; the naming of the dead (58,000 dead, for the United States alone, here rendered real and personal with the naming by Komunyakaa of just one soldier –Andrew Johnson, and the poet's memory of a 'booby trap's white flash'); the terrible, isolated communion of the bereaved, visible to each other only in reflection; and a final resolution, in the movingly and reassuringly mundane image of a woman not obliterating lives or memories but merely brushing a child's hair.

Of course, there is much else in this poem too, not least Komunyakaa's experience as a black man, his black face fading, 'hiding inside the black granite' and his encounter with a fellow veteran, whose pale eyes look through the poet. The totality of the poem is a powerful endorsement of poetic memorialisation, in spite of the poet's doubts about efficacy. It is a sign too of the tenacity of the elegiac impulse, even in the face of the poet's own manifest resistance: 'I said I wouldn't / dammit: No tears. / I'm stone. I'm flesh.' (2001, pp. 234-235)

As the examples cited above illustrate, performative utterance can be a means of challenging institutions – including the institution of elegy itself – as well as a means of reinforcing prevailing ideologies. Whatever its intention, one ingredient is essential to its efficacy as a performative utterance: as Austin was the first to insist, the speaker must be authorised to speak.

Whence comes the authority of the elegist? There is no formal qualification for elegising. There is no licence or state sanction (as there is, for example, for the marriage celebrant or the sentencing judge). For Pierre Bourdieu (1991), performative utterances are 'acts of

institution', the efficacy of which is inseparable from the institutions – the church, state, court or family – that set the conditions to be fulfilled in order for the magical words to operate. Like Austin, Bourdieu argues that an individual wishing to participate in a performative utterance must be entitled – authorised by the appropriate institution – to do so (Bourdieu 1991, p. 73). The power of the performative, says Bourdieu, is not in the utterance itself, but in the institutional conditions of its production and reception (p. 111). 'For ritual to function and operate it must first of all present itself and be perceived as legitimate, with stereotyped symbols serving precisely to show that the agent does not act in his own name and on his own authority, but in his capacity as a delegate' (p. 115).

This chapter has already touched briefly upon the way in which elegists *represent themselves* as 'delegates' in this sense – inheritors of the painful but necessary task of elegising, handed down to them by poets of the past. This notion of delegation warrants closer inspection, if only because the delegation is very much self-appointed – an extension, perhaps, of the recurring sense through the ages that the poet in some way fulfils a social role akin to poet-priest, or even perhaps Shelley's 'unacknowledged legislators of the world'. The 'felicity' of the elegy as a performative utterance derives from an acceptance of the delegation, or authorisation, by the elegist himself or herself, with the support of other poets and the reading public. It is a delegation a poet asserts, in part, by explicitly referencing the tradition of which he or she is an inheritor, through phrases such as 'yet again' and 'once more', and through the overt employment of poetic devices and conventions that are peculiarly associated with elegy and that have been handed down to the poet through time. The elegist is authorised by those who went before – poets who, in turn, were authorised by earlier generations. Milton, in 'Lycidas', articulates this notion of inheritance. 'Milton the delegate' announces himself, and his task, from the outset. He is apologetic about his apprentice status (he plucks the berries before they are ripe) but is compelled by tragic

circumstance (King's death) to attempt such a serious, adult enterprise as this elegy. The authorisation is therefore of a peculiar kind: authorisation by self-identification.

Of course, not every elegist engages in this conscious and reflexive acknowledgment of inheritance. There are many elegies that make no overt obeisance to the past or to earlier elegists, but it could be argued that the recourse to poetry itself *is* the obeisance, the self-identification gives effect to the delegation.

It must be acknowledged, before this chapter concludes, that the developments, discussed here, that have built upon and so altered Austin's original concept of performative utterance, have not been universally accepted. David Gorman (1999), for example, is scathing about the use (or, as he sees it, abuse) of Speech-Act Theory and Austin in literary criticism, particularly by the likes of Jacques Derrida, an abuse he sees exemplified in Sandy Petrey's 1990 book *Speech Acts and Literary Theory*. Gorman protests that while Austin's 12 lectures, gathered together in *How to do things with words*, cover significant ground, just two elements attract the greater share of literary-critical response. First is Austin's exclusion of literature as a category of utterance that can be considered performative. According to Gorman, the effect on literary critics has been akin to a red rag to a bull (1999, p. 96).

Critics seem to take it as a denigration, on Austin's part, of what they study – as if to let it pass without challenge would constitute a blot on the honor of literature and criticism.

The second of Austin's ideas that is skewed by literary theorists, Gorman suggests, is the concept of the performative utterance itself, and its proximity to the concept of *performance*. Gorman believes this lexicological similarity has led literary theorists to simplify, enlarge and otherwise misinterpret the idea of the performative utterance until it has become the 'now-familiar shibboleth of "the performative"' (1999, p. 97). Gorman appears to resent that Austin's formulation of the performative, which is essentially linguistic, has been embraced,

modified and put to the service of (Gorman might say hijacked by) other disciplines. Yet this was probably an inevitability, and I prefer to interpret what has occurred (regardless of whether one fully accepts each new adoption and adaptation of Austin's original thesis) as a healthy and inquisitive search for new applications of a seductive original idea.

The next chapter takes a closer look at one particular application of the performative utterance by the elegist – the naming and farewelling of the dead – and how it has been engaged by poets across the centuries to help them perform the complex work of mourning.

## Chapter 4

### Hail and farewell. Naming, re-naming, and elegiac performativity

Some of the most potent and meaningful kinds of performative utterances are those involving naming and re-naming. They include christening ceremonies (whether of a boat or a baby), religious ceremonies of confirmation, and marriage ceremonies involving the taking of a common surname. Louis Althusser, in his development of Austin's original notions of performativity, dwells on this idea of naming as a performative utterance – what he calls 'interpellation'. In order to illustrate this concept, he describes a commonplace incident on the street: one person hailing another. The one hailed turns in response, and in so doing, becomes a subject – is brought into social existence – by the one who has hailed (Althusser 1971, p. 163).

For Althusser, this act of mutual recognition between the hailer and the hailed is an ideological act. The subject is, in addition to being brought into social existence, also *subjugated* by being named, and by accepting his or her name, is also accepting of his or her place. Althusser expands on this idea, drawing on examples from Christian texts replete not only with instances of naming but also of *re-naming* – the calling (by the hailer) into existence of a new identity in an old skin. So, in biblical texts, Abram becomes Abraham, Simon becomes Peter, Saul becomes Paul, Jacob becomes Israel. In Roman Catholic ceremonies in our own time, a child is given one name at christening and accepts a new name on confirmation, a nun takes an assumed name as she makes her vows, and a new Pope sheds his old identity in the white smoke that arises from the Vatican's chimneys, taking the name of another – Jorge becomes Francis, Joseph becomes Benedict, Karol becomes John Paul.

While Althusser's interest is in explicating the social consequences of naming – the bringing into social existence of an individual, complete with an accepted set of social rules – this chapter looks at the role the performative act of naming, or hailing, plays in the work of mourning (often *with*, but sometimes *without* the explicit mention of the dead person's name), especially when the 'hailing' or direct address is coupled, as it so frequently is, in elegiac poetry, with a subsequent 'farewell'. This final relinquishment is the poetic equivalent of Freud's notion of the withdrawal of the libido by the mourner, as described in Chapter 2 – the detachment of emotional energy and psychological investment, so that it can be reinvested anew.

Elegy has a long-established tradition of naming the dead, and an equally long tradition of pairing this naming (a calling back into social existence) with a final farewelling, or relinquishment. It is a tradition that frequently appears in the formulation *ave atque vale*: hail and farewell. From the Roman poets Catullus and Virgil, in the 1st century BCE, to Englishmen like Dryden in the 17th, and Tennyson and Swinburne in the 19th centuries, to Canadian Anne Carson, in our own century, poets have explicitly 'hailed and farewelled' their dead. This hailing of the dead is performed not just to re-evoke them, *but in order* to farewell them. The dead are conjured in order that the elegist can engage in ritualised farewell and enact the detachment that is part of the process of healthy mourning.

Significantly, there is also a long tradition in elegy of *re*-naming, as a means both of honouring the dead (by comparing them to mythological heroes or gods) and of transforming the dead from what they were, into what they must henceforth be. This process can be seen as a further exercise in detachment and distancing of the survivor (the elegist) from the dead, and another form of farewell. Instances of elegiac re-naming will be considered later in this chapter.

Naming is a potent performative utterance, conferring identity and belonging (sometimes, ownership). When a baby is born, one of the first questions asked of the new parents is what name they have chosen. Surnames are frequently changed on marriage or divorce to signal the start or end of legal and social alliances. The handing down of first names through generations is practised in many societies (for example from father to son) including, in Australia and elsewhere, in the form of a 'middle name'. In the 1990s the journal *New Scientist*, not entirely in jest, coined the term 'nominative determinism' to describe instances where people's professions matched their names – a twist on the much older Latin notion of *nomen est omen*: the name is a sign.

The state sometimes seeks to control what names may be used. In Australia, registrars have the capacity, under state and territory laws, to refuse to register a name that is obscene or offensive, too long, contains symbols without phonetic significance or resembles an official title or rank – for example King, Sir or General. Cultural controls over the use of names can also be found. We see the exercise of such control in a particularly potent form in societies that impose taboos *against* naming of the dead. The term taboo comes from the Tongan words for 'mark' (ta) and 'exceedingly' (bu) and has come to refer to words or names that can only be uttered by certain individuals in a particular community, or under special conditions or in limited circumstances (Andrews 1996, p. 394). Such taboos are found in communities ranging from the Navaho of North America to some Indigenous nations of northern Australia, and they often forbid the use of a dead person's name for a defined period of 'danger' (Horton 1994, p. 1045).

Paradoxically, a refusal to explicitly name the dead can be offered as further proof that naming is an exceedingly powerful form of performative utterance, an utterance that acts upon the world. For certain Indigenous Australian peoples, speaking the name of a dead

person risks summoning that person's spirit back to the world of mortal humans – with potentially negative implications, because 'to evoke the recently deceased through name or image is to risk exposure to the realm of the spirit, to the power of the dead, and to conflicts that may be associated with particular death' (Jacklin 2005, p. 7).

A belief that the non-living (including the malevolent dead, in the form of demons or devils) might be conjured by the performative utterance of naming has been a feature of many societies and cultures throughout human history. In his 1632 attack on the theatre, *Histriomastix*, the English Puritan, William Prynne, recounted how an actor playing Faust in the Christopher Marlowe play, *Doctor Faustus*, had conjured a *real* devil on-stage at the Belsavage Playhouse, 'the truth of which I have heard from many now alive, who well remember it, there being some there distracted with that fearful sight' (as cited in Guenther 2011, p. 46). Prynne's primary purpose was to demonstrate, through the telling of this story, the inherent evil of contemporary theatre. Here was an actor, playing Faust upon a stage, inadvertently conjuring, through necromancy and naming, an *actual* devil, instead of the purely theatrical devils provided for in Marlowe's script.

It is clear that both the *utterance* of a name (a hailing), and the taboo *against* utterance of a name, are grounded in the same belief: that to name the dead may be to evoke the dead. Taboos are not a means of ignoring the dead or attempting to banish them from memory. Rather, the taboo is an explicit *acknowledgment* of the dead: '... [T]he taboo against naming is far from a form of (or desire for) forgetting'. Rather, it is a 'recognition that the dead continue, their power continues, amongst the social body' (Jacklin 2005, p. 14). And just as recognising the power of naming allows societies with naming taboos to ensure that the dead remain in the realm of the dead, so it grants the elegist, born into other societies and traditions, the opportunity to summon the dead for a final and personal farewell.

Yet, as we have seen already, elegists often wrestle with their creations, and sometimes the very processes of hailing and farewelling are challenged by the elegist, as a means of testing or contesting the elegiac conventions, especially in cases where the loss and grief are complicated by some real or perceived social or legal sanctions. Paul Monette's poem, 'No Goodbyes', for his lover Roger Horowitz, challenges both the naming and farewelling elements of the elegy (Monette 2008, p. 114/1342):

... one last graze in the meadow  
of you and please let your final dream be  
a man not quite your size losing the whole  
world but still here combing combing  
singing your secret names till the night's gone.

Monette was writing his non-goodbye (but real farewell) for Roger Horowitz in the 1980s, during the early years of the emergence of AIDS, and it is possible to freight the 'secret names' of his poem with the power of a naming taboo – especially in light of Monette's other writings about his early struggles to accept his sexuality. And yet, at a broader level, Monette's 'hailing' of Roger is very explicit in the title of the volume of poems from which 'No Goodbyes' is drawn: *Love Alone: Eighteen Elegies for Rog*.

The conventions of naming and re-naming (and, conversely, the occasional and adamant *refusal to name*) found in so much elegiac poetry amount to the exercise of a performative utterance. The dead are hailed, summoned back into social existence, *re-animated*, precisely so they can be addressed, interrogated, and, ultimately, farewelled. *Ave atque vale*. The reconstitution of the dead, their conjuring, by the elegist, is performed in order that they may be, in the Freudian model of mourning, also relinquished – not forgotten, but permanently altered. The elegist, as the hailer on the street, the one with Althusser's power to subjugate, also has the social power to relinquish, and exercises that power. In so doing, the elegist is able to locate a possible future for himself or herself beyond the life that was shared with the dead person.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the phrase *ave atque vale* dates at least back to the Roman poet Gaius Valerius Catullus, writing in the 1st century BCE. The phrase concluded a short elegy known as ‘Catullus 101’, written in mourning for the poet’s brother (the complete final line was ‘*atque in perpetuum frater ave atque vale*’ – and forever brother hail and farewell). While the dead man was not hailed by name, he was hailed by the term ‘frater’ (brother) three times in the poem’s nine lines, addressed directly, conjured, and farewelled.

One of the first to echo and cite Catullus was Virgil, in *The Aeneid*. In Book XI, Aeneas hails and farewells the dead Pallas (Virgil 1990, p. 334), at the conclusion of a funeral procession (another standard trope of elegy):

Aeneas halted,  
Sighed from the heart, and spoke a final word:  
‘more of the same drear destiny of battle  
Calls me back to further tears. Forever  
Hail to you, my noble friend, my Pallas,  
Hail and farewell forever.’

In Roman times, this naming of the dead, or calling out to the dead, as part of a funerary rite, was known as the *conclamatio*. Peterson (1969) argues that the *conclamatio* typically appeared – as in the examples by Catullus and Virgil cited above – in a ‘highly ritualistic, intensely serious context’ (p. 234).

In the 17th century, in ‘To the Memory of Mr Oldham’, written to mourn the satirical poet John Oldham, Dryden hails, re-names and farewells his friend – and also makes explicit his authority for undertaking this performative utterance (Hayward 1948, pp. 258-259). Dryden names (hails) his friend in the title of the poem, before comparing him (re-naming him), in the body of the poem, to two Virgilian figures drawn from *The Aeneid*. First, he compares his friend to Euryalus, who, courtesy of an accident involving the leader in a running race (Dryden, as Nisus), is handed victory. But the race, of course, is the one no-one could wish to win: the race to death: ‘The last set out the soonest did arrive’, Dryden writes. He then

proceeds to re-name his friend for a *second* figure from *The Aeneid* – Marcellus, killed before his promise can be fulfilled: ‘Once more, hail and farewell; farewell thou young, / But ah too short, Marcellus of our tongue’ (Hayward 1948, pp. 258-259).

Just as Catullus establishes his delegation, or authority, to elegise for his brother, through his repeated references to their family relationship, so Dryden needs to poetically establish *his* credentials for summoning and farewelling John Oldham. He does so, on two fronts: as a friend, and as a fellow poet, tasked, as we have seen in the previous chapter, with the unenviable job of farewelling one of his profession. First, he establishes the intimacy of their friendship and the similarity of their personalities and interests (Hayward 1948, p. 258):

For sure our Souls were near allied, and thine  
Cast in the same poetic mould with mine.  
One common Note on either lyre did strike,  
And knaves and fools we both abhorr'd alike.  
To the same goal did both our studies drive;

There are echoes here of ‘Lycidas’, written some decades earlier, in which Milton establishes his credentials for mourning Edward King in the lines: ‘nurs'd upon the self-same hill, / Fed the same flock, by fountain, shade, and rill’ (1993, pp. 56-57).

Once Dryden has established his elegiac authority as a friend of Oldham, he strengthens his claim as delegate, presenting his own authority as a poet and lamenting the unfulfilled promise of a peer, while praising (with something of a back-handed compliment) the rough vigour of his friend’s extant works (Hayward 1948, pp. 258-259):

O early ripe! To thy abundant store  
What could advancing age have added more?  
It might (what nature never gives the young)  
Have taught the numbers of thy native tongue.  
But satire needs not those, and wit will shine  
Thro’ the harsh cadence of a rugged line:  
A noble error, and but seldom made,  
When poets are by too much force betray’d.  
Thy generous fruits, tho’ gathered ere their prime,

Still shew'd a quickness; and maturing time  
But mellows what we write to the dull sweets of rhyme.

The reference to the friendly rivalry of the Euryalus/Nisus running race helps establish the proximate relationship that gives rise to a legitimate delegation – the two men were competitors and colleagues.

It is worth noting that both Virgil and Catullus use the word ‘forever’ to signal that the adieu to the men they mourn is permanent and irrevocable. This practice of stressing the final nature of the farewell is common to a number of ‘hail and farewell’ elegies, demonstrating that such performative utterances are focused on enacting the final phase of the work of mourning. We find the same finality in Swinburne’s Victorian-era elegy for fellow-poet Baudelaire, ‘Ave Atque Vale’ (1940, pp. 225-231). The dead poet is hailed and summoned back to hear a recitation of his worth. Swinburne, like Catullus and Virgil before him, directly addresses the dead – a device familiar to us from much elegiac poetry. Yet Swinburne’s reader is quickly made aware that this communication is one-way. There neither can be, nor will be, any reply (p. 227-228):

O quiet eyes wherein the light saith nought,  
    Whereto the day is dumb, nor any night  
    With obscure finger silences your sight,  
Nor in your speech the sudden soul speaks thought,  
    Sleep, and have sleep for light.

And then,

Thou art far too far for wings of words to follow,  
    Far too far off for thought or any prayer.

The permanence of the farewell, made man to man, poet to poet, and survivor to the dead, is palpable.

In the early 20th century, the phrase *ave atque vale*, either in its original Latin or in translation, was appropriated by poets elegising the war dead. One was the British poet

William Arthur Dunkerley, writing as John Oxenham, whose popular lines have been widely anthologised as well as being incorporated into memorial statuary erected in both Adelaide and Sydney (Inglis & Brazier 2008, p. 282):

They died that we might live, --  
Hail! -- And Farewell!  
-- All honour give  
To those who, nobly striving, nobly fell,  
That we might live!

In the same period, ‘hail and farewell’ also finds its way into very domestic elegy. Winifred Welles takes the anglicised phrase as the title for a short poem that compares and contrasts a pregnant woman’s period of waiting for the arrival of her unborn baby, with an adult daughter’s period of waiting by the deathbed of her mother, a curious, conflated lament for ‘[m]others, who wait for children to be born, / Children, who wait for mothers to be dead’ (Welles 1917, p. 470).

Welles’ ‘vale’ may be an *apprehended* farewell but it, too, is unquestionably final (p. 470):

Oh wearier than the months that wait for birth  
Are those that wait for death?  
How shall I be  
Still while you are so still?  
How shall I see  
Unbrokenhearted your slow steps from earth?

The elegist asks how a daughter might continue to exist (using ‘still’ in its adverbial form – how shall I *be*, still?) once the dying woman is ‘still’ in the adjectival sense (motionless, dead). Yet even in asking ‘how’, she comprehends that this will be.

In the 21st century Anne Carson takes ‘Catullus 101’ as her starting point in *NOX* (2010), her poetic response to the death of her brother, Michael. At one level, this book could be described as a deconstruction of Catullus’s original. In *NOX*, Carson devotes a page of notes to each of the words that make up ‘Catullus 101’. Each page lists various definitions of the

relevant Latin word, from the familiar to the increasingly subtle, including archaic shades of meaning – a kind of facsimile of a traditional dictionary entry and yet cleverly and seductively poetic. These pages of definitions alternate with Carson’s prose-poetic ruminations on history, family and memory, interspersed with sketches, shreds, images of torn text, old family snapshots. The volume is printed not in a conventionally bound book with cut pages, but on a single, concertina-stretch of paper, which is packaged, without page numbers, in a grey box, like a keepsake, or a box of ashes, or something camouflaged as something else.

Intriguingly, Carson’s translation of Catullus’s final line is, ‘and into forever, brother, farewell and farewell’. In translating the phrase in this way she subverts the convention, treating ‘hailing’ as just another species of farewell. There is something in the notion. After all, the act of hailing contains within it the seeds of a future farewell. It is in the nature of human relationships that they must end, either in death or the loss associated with estrangement. Alternatively, Carson may be treating ‘farewell’ as a kind of more general salutation: the ‘fare wel’ of Middle English (Morris 1969, p. 476). The ambiguity suggests a willing testing of alternative readings of Catullus’s ending and perhaps even a psychological and emotional hesitation. It is entirely plausible that Carson may have struggled with the final relinquishment of her brother. They had been estranged during their adult lives, so in one sense Michael had ‘died’ for Carson long before she wrote *NOX* (although he had not, perhaps, been farewelled). At one point in the poem Carson ruminates on the biblical story of Lazarus, so often held up by Christians as a proof of the miraculous, but a story that for Carson can simultaneously be read as a cautionary reminder of the impermanence even of miracles, or the imposition upon a survivor, of two occasions of grief: ‘You can think of Lazarus as an example of resurrection or as a person who had to die twice’ (Carson 2010, n.p.).

Like many elegists, Carson (2010, n.p.) questions the efficacy of her efforts:

I wanted to fill my elegy with light of all kinds. But death makes us stingy. There is nothing more to be expended on that, we think, he's dead. Love cannot alter it. Words cannot add to it.

Creating her memorial, enacting the ritual, Carson remains sceptical of her task, quoting Herodotos: 'I have to say what is said. I don't have to believe it myself' (2010, n.p.). And, like other elegists, she is frustrated by her brother's silence – in this instance, a silence that stretches in two directions: backwards, into the silence of their years of estrangement; and forwards, into the irreversible silence imposed by Michael's death. Carson's 'dictionary entry' for the word 'Mutam' includes such definitions as 'inarticulate', 'lacking the faculty of speech', 'saying nothing', 'silent', 'robbed of utterance' and 'giving no information'. Building through this recitation of meanings is a sense of the poet's mounting frustration, and a seeking for answers she knows will not come (Carson 2010, n.p.):

In a cigarette-smoke-soaked Copenhagen, under a wide thin sorrowful sky, as swans drift down the water, I am looking a long time into the muteness of my brother. It resists me.

The elegist may employ the *conclamatio*, utter the name, summon the dead. But as Swinburne articulated so well, there is only the call going out. No answer can be expected.

In the 17th century Ben Jonson also used the device of naming the dead – calling his son Benjamin back from extinguishment for the purpose of final relinquishment in his poem 'On My First Son'. His naming of his son is made even more plangent by the fact that the dead boy shares his father's name – Benjamin. So, when the poet writes, 'Here doth lie / Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry', (Jonson c. 1892, p. 233) it is a double-death Jonson mourns: his young son's death, and the death of himself, as a father. (Jonson had, a decade earlier, lost a daughter in infancy. Decades later, he was to lose another son, who was also named Ben, further evidence of the meaning and significance of naming: a dead son named for a dead son named for a father in mourning for his own fatherhood).

Jonson is able, at least intellectually, to draw upon the conventional consolations of his time, including the belief that the dead are fortunate to have escaped the inevitable hardships and miseries of life. And yet, though he mouths the conventions ('For why / Will man lament the state he should envy? / To have so soon 'scaped world's and flesh's rage, / And if no other misery, yet age?'), Jonson in the end cannot take much comfort from such bleak solace. His consolation (and it is an unenviable one) consists in reassuring himself that he can elect never to love so fiercely again (c. 1892, p. 233):

Rest in soft peace, and, ask'd, say, 'Here doth lie  
Ben Jonson his best piece of poetry.'  
For whose sake henceforth all his vows be such,  
As what he loves may never like too much.

In hailing and farewelling his son, he also hails and farewells his identity as a parent.

In 'No Laughing Matter', another elegy by a parent for a child, Adrian Caesar's naming of his dead son Damian takes an enlarged and physical form: 'a graffito for the wall / emphatic and unoriginal / in spray-can white: *Damian was here*' (Caesar 2014, p. 37). The larger-than-life scrawl, with its past-tense 'was here' can be read as simultaneously a hailing *and* a farewell, a 'a sign of [Damian's] gone-ness'. For good measure, the wall on which it is daubed proves impenetrable, forcing Caesar (2014, p. 37) to acknowledge that the gone-ness is permanent:

... the wall is grave  
and silent and no matter how much  
I stare and mutter and mouth  
all I should have done and spoken  
it will not give and no-one can  
demolish it.

In many elegies – perhaps most – there is no question about the primary emotion governing the relationship between the elegist and the dead. They are lamentations born out of love. But some elegists – and Carson, in *NOX*, is one example – confront a different challenge: to hail and finally farewell those with whom they have had problematic relationships. Ginsberg's 'Kaddish', written for his mentally ill mother Naomi, is such a poem, alternately lyrical and

scarifying, loving and cold-eyed. Summoned repeatedly by name and addressed directly, Naomi is also explicitly farewelled in the mantra-like fourth section of the poem (Ginsberg 2010, p. 59), which begins:

O mother  
what have I left out  
O mother  
what have I forgotten  
O mother  
farewell  
with a long black shoe  
farewell  
with Communist Party and a broken stocking  
farewell  
with six dark hairs on the wen of your breast.

The poem concludes with the muffled drum-beat of a dirge (pp. 60-61):

farewell ...  
with your eyes of ovaries removed  
with your eyes of shock  
with your eyes of lobotomy  
with your eyes of divorce  
with your eyes of stroke  
with your eyes alone  
with your eyes  
with your eyes  
with your Death full of Flowers.

Another such 'hail and farewell' elegy arising from a problematic relationship is John Berryman's visceral *Dream Songs* howl (2004, p. 145), uttered while standing in rage above the grave of his father, who had committed suicide:

When will indifference come, I moan and rave  
I'd like to scabble till I got right down  
away down under the grass  
  
and ax the casket open ha to see  
just how he's taking it, which he sought so hard  
we'll tear apart  
the mouldering grave clothes ha & then Henry  
will heft the ax once more, his final card,  
and fell it on the start.

Berryman's 'hailing' of his father back into social existence thus takes a spectacularly physical form: disinterment. His 'vale' is similarly brutal and final.

This is an extreme example of something that almost all elegies attempt in one way or another – to reconstitute and reposition the dead. Elegy's tradition of re-naming the dead, mentioned earlier in this chapter, is perhaps the most common device by which elegists alter the identity of a dead person – and they do so not merely to illuminate the dead person's attributes or personality, but also, I argue, as part of the process of relinquishment and detachment. Such re-naming helps perform the work of separation that is essential to a healthy process of mourning and recovery.

Milton reconstructs his friend, Edward King, as Lycidas. Spenser transforms Sir Philip Sidney into Astrophel. Shelley re-names Keats as Adonais. Such re-namings, like the re-namings of the Jewish and Christian traditions, confer upon the dead a new identity and a changed social status. This is especially potent when the re-naming involves the invoking of mythical or god-like figures. As those re-named are elevated beyond the human realm, so they are acknowledged to have joined the company of the unreachable. Further, the dead are sometimes not merely re-named by a poet (directly or by implication, via the mythologies or histories to which a poet alludes) but transformed utterly – into plants, genii, even inanimate objects in the heavens. This is an acknowledgment of their profoundly changed status and their unbridgeable physical and emotional distance from the lives of those who survive to mourn them. In 'Lycidas', Edward King becomes the 'genius of the shore'. Shelley changes Keats into a star 'burning through the inmost veil of heaven'. Spenser transforms Sidney into a flower. Slessor's Joe Lynch becomes merely 'part of an idea'.

By employing the device of re-naming and transforming the dead into a mythical or historical figure, or an arguably even more remote botanical or celestial object, or an even more abstract

'idea', the elegist does not simply highlight the special, often heroic qualities of the mourned individual, but situates them firmly in a separate realm. Re-named, re-cast, they take on a new identity and a new role. This distancing is crucial to the process of saying farewell, since the dead person is, in some respects, now a stranger – no longer the real and familiar individual who lies dead and lamented, but a strange rendering into admirable but essentially abstract qualities.

To the extent that the performative utterance of elegy performs the work of mourning, then, the necessary detachment – the farewell – becomes detachment from someone (or something) who (or which) is already, by the elegist's own deliberate action, part-stranger, a reconstituted person (or object, or abstract notion) from whom the elegist can and must now turn.

## Chapter 5

### As if consolation were possible

*The poem is the cry of its occasion*

(Wallace Stevens 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven')

Wallace Stevens describes modern poetry as '[t]he poem of the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice' (1990, p. 239). The poet's words make the unbearable bearable and are the utterance that renders the impossible possible. They constitute a supreme fiction that in our hearts we know to be fiction but that allows us to get on with the business of life, *as if* it were not fiction at all.

Stevens's supreme fictions are particularly suggestive in relation to an exploration of elegiac poetry, because of all poets it is arguably the elegist who seeks most strenuously for *what will suffice*. The subject matter of elegy verges on the unspeakable and the task of the elegist is never straightforward: to make presence out of absence; to console when consolation seems impossible; to memorialise, when even the memorial will crumble, fade or be forgotten; to speak *with* the dead or *of* the dead.

But what makes elegiac poetry successful? What felicities are brought to the utterance? What makes the poet's words, in the terminology of J.L. Austin, 'serious' words (1975, p. 22)? This chapter explores some of the ways in which even language that openly and self-consciously draws upon fictions might nevertheless qualify as serious language – language capable of effecting a successful performative utterance at the hands of an elegist. It takes as its starting point Stevens' work, and his poetic interrogation of the idea of supreme fictions. It explores, more generally, the development of notions of efficacious fictions, from Kant onwards and discusses whether it is possible to draw from such theoretical frameworks any enlightenment regarding the enduring appeal and efficacy of elegiac poetry. It extends the examination of

why elegy *suffices* in an increasingly secular age, when it can no longer routinely or reliably hold out the comfort of conventional consolations. Included in this examination are elegies that incorporate conventional religious and pagan consolations, as well as secular elegies that eschew, or even subvert, these conventions.

For Stevens, the idea of poetry comprehended a great deal. In a letter to his friend Henry Church<sup>3</sup> in 1940, (Stevens 1966, p. 378) Stevens writes that:

The major poetic idea in the world is and has always been the idea of God. One of the visible movements of the modern imagination is the movement away from the idea of God. The poetry that created the idea of God will either adapt it to our different intelligence, or create a substitute for it, or make it unnecessary.

For Stevens, this task fell to the modern poet, who could no longer rely upon or repeat ‘what was in the script’ (1990, p. 239). The poet’s challenge was to construct new scenery, write a new script, perform a new and convincing drama – a supreme fiction.

The supreme fiction was a notion Stevens returned to again and again, in his poetry and in his letters. Writing to Church, in December 1942 (1966, p. 430), Stevens contends that:

There are things with respect to which we willingly suspend disbelief; if there is instinctive in us a will to believe, or if there is a will to believe, whether or not it is instinctive, it seems to me that we can suspend disbelief with reference to a fiction as easily as we can suspend it with reference to anything else. There are fictions that are extensions of reality.

More than a decade later, in an introduction to a 1954 reprint of his poetry, Stevens says that his work suggests ‘the possibility of a supreme fiction, recognised as a fiction, in which men could propose to themselves a fulfillment’ (Beckett 1974, p. 1). In a letter to Hi Simons in August 1940 (1966, p. 370), Stevens writes:

If one no longer believes in God (as truth), it is not possible merely to disbelieve; it becomes necessary to believe in something else. Logically, I ought to believe in

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<sup>3</sup> Stevens’ poem, ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’, was dedicated to Church.

essential imagination, but that has its difficulties. It is easier to believe in a thing created by the imagination.

Although he returns frequently to the theme, Stevens remains reluctant, or unable, to pin down in his prose or letters exactly what he means by the phrase *supreme fiction*. 'I have no idea of the form that a supreme fiction would take,' he writes to Henry Church in 1942 (1966, p. 430).

The NOTES [the poem 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction'] start out with the idea that it would not take any form: that it would be abstract. Of course, in the long run, poetry would be the supreme fiction; the essence of poetry is change and the essence of change is that it give pleasure.

But then, in a letter to Hi Simons about the same poem (1966, p. 435), Stevens writes:

I ought to say that I have not defined supreme fiction. A man as familiar with my things as you are will be justified in thinking that I mean poetry. I don't want to say that I don't mean poetry; I don't know what I mean.

And in a letter to Gilbert Montague, a former classmate at Harvard (1966, p. 443), Stevens writes:

Underlying ['Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction'] is the idea that, in the various predicaments of belief, it might be possible to yield, or to try to yield, ourselves to a declared fiction.

The use of the word 'yield' is interesting, suggesting a struggle between the impulse to believe, and the rational mind. The same struggle can be detected in Stevens' letter to Hi Simon, mentioned above, in which he writes that he resists even attempting to come to a precise definition, because as soon as he starts to rationalise or conceptualise, he loses 'the poetry of the idea' (1966, p. 435). As late as 1954, Stevens could still assert that, 'in projecting a supreme fiction, I cannot imagine anything more fatal than to state it definitely and incautiously' (1966, p. 863).

As Simon Critchley, among others, has observed, Stevens was notoriously unable to translate the philosophical underpinnings of his poetry into prose. For Critchley at least, this does not

betray a weakness or superficiality in the philosophical content of Stevens' poetry. Rather, it is evidence that there is something about Stevens' poetic brilliance that allows him to render, in his verse, weighty philosophical ideas that he was incapable of convincingly setting down in prose (Critchley 2005, p. 31).

So it is to Stevens' poetry that we turn, for a deeper, and more acute (even if not necessarily fixed) sense of what he intended by his career-long quest to find what might suffice, his mission to articulate a supreme fiction. In 'Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas', (Stevens 1990, p. 259) the quest is described as:

... the chants  
Of the brooder seeking the acutest end  
Of speech: to pierce the heart's residuum  
And there to find music for a single line,  
Equal to memory, one line in which  
The vital music formulates the words.

Stevens elaborates on this 'acutest end of speech' in 'Chocorua to its Neighbor' (1990, p. 300):

To say more than human things with human voice,  
That cannot be; to say human things with more  
Than human voice, that, also, cannot be;  
To speak humanly from the height or from the depth  
Of human things, that is acutest speech.

The notion of speaking 'humanly from the height or from the depth / Of human things' is one of the best formulations Stevens ever suggested about why his supreme fictions might matter. Through such fictions, human beings help to make the world and their lives comprehensible – or, if not comprehensible, then spiritually bearable, emotionally sufficient, intellectually survivable – and these themes were explored by Stevens in many poems over the course of his career.

In the early poem 'A High-Toned Old Christian Woman', from his first collection, (1990 p. 59), Stevens starts unambiguously: 'Poetry is the supreme fiction, madame'. As time and poetry goes on, his definition becomes more abstract and richer.

'The Owl in the Sarcophagus' was written after the death of Stevens' friend and long-time correspondent Henry Church and is populated by mystical figures – two brothers, Peace and Sleep, and a third female figure: 'she that says / Good-by in the darkness, speaking quietly there, / to those that cannot say good-by themselves' (Stevens 1990, p. 431). 'These forms', Stevens writes, are '... visible to the eye that needs, / Needs out of the whole necessity of sight'. They exist, Stevens suggests, because we need them to exist: they are 'formed / Out of our lives to keep us in our death' (1990, pp. 432-434).

Stevens sees an inescapable role for the artist in the creation of such fictions. Yet paradoxically, he often invokes the musician, rather than the poet, to make his case most compellingly. In 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' (1990, p. 165), he writes,

They said, 'You have a blue guitar,  
You do not play things as they are.'

The man replied, 'Things as they are  
Are changed upon the blue guitar.'

The musician creates, through his art, upon his oddly-coloured instrument, a reality sufficient for his needs – but not necessarily the *only* reality. The listener/watcher protests: 'you do not play things as they are'. But the musician mildly disputes this: 'things as they are / are changed upon the blue guitar'. The fiction/reality created is the one appropriate for and sufficient unto the moment, the instrument, the colour of the varnish, the musician, the poet.

Similarly, in 'The Idea of Order at Key West', it is a woman, singing by the ocean, who becomes

the single artificer of the world

In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,  
Whatever self it had, became the self  
That was her song, for she was the maker.

Stevens (1990, pp. 129-130) concludes that

there never was a world for her  
Except the one she sang and, singing, made.

Whatever meaning might inhere in things, Stevens seems to say, exists courtesy of the summoning power of the self.

Perhaps nowhere, paradoxically, is the definition of supreme fictions more elusive, than in the poem in which Stevens puts the phrase front and centre, in the title itself: 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction' (1990, pp. 380-408).

In the first section, subtitled 'It Must be Abstract' the poet seems to be instructing an acolyte or trainee (1990 p. 380): 'Begin, ephebe, by perceiving the idea / Of this invention, this invented world, / The inconceivable idea of the sun'. He urges his audience to become ignorant, so as to see, with an ignorant eye, the sun as an idea. Stevens understands that behind the negative, 20th-century, modern connotations of ignorance (mistakenness, illiteracy, backwardness) lies another, less pejorative meaning: *not knowing*. Not knowing involves an openness to experience, unshackled from pre-determined meanings and pre-calculated values (1990 p. 381).

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,  
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven  
That has expelled us and our images ...

And then,

The sun must bear no name ... but be  
In the difficulty of what it is to be.

What we seek, Stevens seems to say, will elude scholarly reduction, elude the imposition of definition and capture. It is a shape-shifter: it must change. Yet it can be glimpsed, it can give pleasure (including, perhaps, consolation, relief), to the one who, without the effort of reasoning, might, 'out of nothing ...come upon major weather' (1990 p. 404).

It is possible, possible, possible. It must  
Be possible. It must be that in time  
The real will from its crude compoundings come,

Seeming, at first, a beast disgorged, unlike,  
Warmed by a desperate milk. To find the real,  
To be stripped of every fiction except one,

The fiction of an absolute – Angel,  
Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear  
The luminous melody of proper sound.

That Stevens believed it to be the poet's task to compose such melodies is clear from the final, untitled section of the poem (1990 p. 407):

Soldier, there is a war between the mind  
And sky, between thought and day and night. It is  
For that the poet is always in the sun,

Patches the moon together in his room  
To his Virgilian cadences, up down,  
Up down. It is a war that never ends.

And then (1990 pp. 407-408):

The soldier is poor without the poet's lines,

His petty syllabi, the sounds that stick,  
Inevitably modulating, in the blood.  
And war for war, each has its gallant kind.

How simply the fictive hero becomes the real;  
How gladly with proper words the soldier dies,  
If he must, or lives on the bread of faithful speech.

Stevens' 'sounds that stick, / Inevitably modulating, in the blood' claim for poetry the same physical, visceral properties as Auden intuited in his elegy for Yeats, with the dead poet's words 'modified in the guts of the living' (Leonard 1998, p. 105).

Stevens was not exploring new philosophical territory with his notion of supreme fictions. Nor was he the first poet to acknowledge the power of a conscious fiction to make a moment endurable. Poetry, even at its most polemical, does not usually deal in provable truths, but in the testimony of the senses, as re-cast by the mind and imagination. It has always hunted for the intellectual and spiritual illuminations that make intelligible the interstices *between* facts. Elegy, operating on a consciousness that in many cases has been stripped back and is bereft of its usual comforts, must perforce create meanings from new materials. Elegists, whether writing from a place of deep religious certitude, from profound anguish at the absence of God, or from any other perspective, have *always* created fictions that have allowed them (and by extension their readers) to proceed *as if* those fictions were facts. To find 'ease', as Milton puts it, by letting 'frail thoughts dally with false surmise' (1993, p. 60).

Philosophically, much of the discourse on fictions with which we are familiar today is rooted in the 18th-century writings of Immanuel Kant. After dismissing traditional ontological and cosmological 'proofs' of the existence of God in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1929, pp. 500-513), Kant proceeds, in *The Critique of Practical Reason* (2012, pp. 156-167), to devise his own (unproveable) proofs of the existence of God and the immortality of the human soul. Kant is clear in his own mind that the existence of the immortal soul, and God, cannot be *proven*. To do so is not his intention. His argument is a postulate of pure practical

reason, a *theoretical* proposition, not demonstrable as such, but an inseparable result of an unconditional *a priori practical* law – essentially, a moral argument for the existence of God.

The moral argument looks something like this: as a moral agent, I act according to principles, rather than according to desired ends or consequences. However, my actions do nevertheless have an aim (or end). My aim is the greatest possible good – Kant calls it the highest good. If I am obliged, as a moral agent, to seek this highest good, I must believe it to be possible to attain. However, I am also a realist. I know, from my own flawed and flaky life, from the histories I read, and from the lives of those I observe around me, that success is not easy, that I (and every other) have needs that cannot and will not be met by the simple exercise of moral agency. However, I must live *as if* the highest good really were attainable by me (and others), and this requires the existence of God as a postulate of my moral life.

Towards the end of the 18th century, Friedrich Forberg developed Kant's doctrine in his controversial essay, 'The Development of the Concept of Religion' (1798). In that essay, Forberg says man needs to act *as if* evil were surmountable, *as if* error could be eliminated, *as if* good might one day triumph. '[Man] can, if he speculates, leave it undecided whether this [triumph] is possible or impossible', Forberg writes. But in his actions 'he must proceed as if he had decided on its possibility' (Estes & Bowman 2010, p. 43). Far from this being an intellectual exercise, Forberg believes that any human with a good heart is duty-bound to proceed in this fashion (Estes & Bowman 2010, p. 44).

[I]t is not a duty to believe that a moral world-governance or God as the moral world-sovereign exists ... it is merely a duty to act as if one believed it.

Another near contemporary of Kant who explored the idea of fictions – especially legal fictions – was Englishman Jeremy Bentham. As it happened, it was not until the 1930s, a century after Bentham's death, that his scattered writings on the topic from across his career were brought together by his biographer and editor, C.K. Ogden, under the title *Bentham's*

*Theory of Fictions*. Bentham classifies ‘entities’ as either perceptible (known from the testimony of our senses, without the need for reasoning or reflection) or inferential (the existence of which we deduce through reflection or reasoning). An example of a perceptible entity might be a house, or a goat. An example of an inferential entity might be the human soul, or God (Ogden 1932, pp. 7-8). These latter entities Bentham classes as fictions – but fictions that serve such a central purpose in our lives that we tend to overlook their inferential nature. Bentham asks his readers to consider, by way of example, the ‘fiction of right’ – the right to free speech, the right to life, and so on. ‘A man is said to have [such a right], to hold it, to possess it, to acquire it, to lose it,’ Bentham writes. ‘It is thus spoken of as if it were a portion of matter such as a man might take into his hand ...’ (Ogden 1932, p. 118). Yet a ‘right’ cannot be seen, let alone touched or held in the hand. For Bentham, it is an inferred entity, its existence ‘feigned for the purpose of discourse’, yet at the same time a fiction ‘so necessary that without it human discourse could not be carried on’ (p. 118).

There are some commonalities here with Wallace Stevens’ view of the role of the poet in pursuing supreme fictions. The poet’s role, he says, is not to lead people out of the confusion in which they find themselves, but to help them live their lives (Stevens 1951, p. 29). The role of the poet, for Stevens, is no more and no less than to create the world to which we turn, incessantly, and to give life to the supreme fictions without which we would be unable to conceive of that world (p. 31). He describes poetry as (p. 36),

the violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems ... to have something to do with our self-preservation; and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives.

In the 19th century, Hans Vaihinger drew on the theories and writings of Kant, Forberg, Bentham and others to develop a comprehensive ‘As If’ philosophy. Like his antecedents, Vaihinger believed human beings lived with fictions that they actually knew were not true (or

that they acknowledged to be, at best, inherently unprovable), but which allowed them to function in the world. Humans constructed such fictions in many areas of life – in relation to physics, the law, mathematics, and other areas of inquiry. And then they lived their lives ‘as if’ those fictions were true. In contrast to a working hypothesis (which, while it may *currently* be unproven, might be expected to be verified in the future), Vaihinger’s fictions were *known to be false*, but were employed because they served a purpose (Vaihinger 1924, p. xlii).

Wallace Stevens’ familiarity with the philosophy of Vaihinger has been acknowledged by Bloom (1977, p. 164). A number of critics, including Eeckhout, Critchley and Vendler, have observed the frequency with which Stevens uses the conjunctive phrase ‘as if’ in his poetry – on 113 occasions, by Eeckhout’s count (2002, p. 151), including in such poems as ‘Note on Moonlight’ ‘As You Leave the Room’, ‘The Rock’, and ‘To an Old Philosopher in Rome’.

Another 19th-century thinker who was exploring similar ideas to Vaihinger was F.A. Lange. By the time of his early death, in 1875, Lange had developed a theory he called the ‘standpoint of the ideal’. While Lange did not believe in God or immortality, he did believe that humanity needed to ‘supplement reality by an ideal world of [its] own creation ...’ (1925, p. 342) and he thought that this could only be done if mankind acknowledged the value and place of myth. He believed that it was ‘the same transcendental root of our human nature’ that allowed us, through our senses, to apprehend reality, but also, through creative synthesis, to ‘fashion a world of the ideal in which to take refuge from the limitation of the senses ...’ (1925, pp. 364-365). ‘All poesy and revelation are simply false, so soon as we test their material contents by the standard of exact knowledge,’ Lange writes. But these ‘errors or intentional deviations from reality only do harm when they are treated as material knowledge’ (p. 280). Note the use of the word ‘intentional’. For Lange, as for Vaihinger, as for Stevens, the recourse to fictions is a conscious and deliberate act.

This issue of consciousness and intentionality is crucial to the analysis of poetic fictions, and particularly to the use of fictions in elegy as performative utterance. If elegy depends upon the employment of conscious fictions for its performative efficacy, this may be a key to the enduring power of the genre into the secular age. The power of elegy may not now consist in (and may never have depended upon) its capacity to offer traditional consolatory assurances regarding heaven, God and eternal life, despite many people believing literally in its assurances and invocation of an afterlife. Instead, its potency may always have resided, at least to a significant extent, in the ritual act of elegising itself – the annunciation of fictions in a stylised, ritual form.

Such a conclusion is supported by the fact that many elegists, even those who have held out traditional religious consolations, have been explicitly aware of the provisional nature of their consolations, and the tenuousness of any proofs of those consolations. Milton draws so heavily upon – *depends* upon – the ancient cultural conventions of the pastoral form, in addition to Christian consolations, because he understands their ritual and poetic power. They enable him to enlarge the meaning of his friend's premature death in 'Lycidas', deploying such citationally freighted tropes as the vegetation god and the metamorphosis of the dead into celestial form.

Henry King was a 17th-century priest-poet (later Bishop of Chichester) whose elegy for his young wife, titled 'The Exequy', is one of the best-known elegies to survive from the period. One might suppose that a poet so closely connected to Christian belief would draw upon the full consolations of his faith in writing an elegy for his wife. To be sure, 'The Exequy' abounds in images of the couple's eventual reunion, but King is clear from the second line that this verse is a 'complaint', not a 'dirge' (Hayward 1948, p. 74). There is none of the rigorist's calm acceptance and fortitude here, no acceptance of God's wisdom and inalienable

*right* to take his wife. Rather, here is a man (also a priest) whose universe has been so altered that all he can do – all he *wants* to do – is meditate upon the love he and his wife shared, and wish away the hours until they can meet again (Hayward 1948, p. 78):

Stay for me there; I will not fail  
To meet thee in that hollow vale:  
And think not much of my delay;  
I am already on the way,  
And follow thee with all the speed  
Desire can make, or sorrows breed.  
Each minute is a short degree,  
And ev'ry houre a step towards thee.

If King looks forward with anticipation to the Judgment Day, it has mostly to do with his human love for his wife (1948, p. 76):

never shall I  
Be so much blest as to descry  
A glimpse of thee, till that day come,  
Which shall the earth to cinders doom  
And a fierce Fever must calcine  
The body of this world like thine,  
My Little World! That fit of fire  
Once off, our bodies shall aspire  
To our souls' bliss; then we shall rise,  
And view ourselves with clearer eyes  
In that calm region, where no night  
Can hide us from each other's sight.

Whatever else King looks forward to seeing, or witnessing, or being a part of, on that day, the rapture for which he clearly hopes takes the form of a personal reunion. The conventions of his faith may be sincere but the pressure of his feelings of personal loss as they are admitted into his poem reveal them as akin to those (sincere) fictions that Stevens, Vaihinger and others discuss; fictions that enable the elegist, whether Christian or secular, to find what will suffice in the face of heartrending loss and sadness.

Read in this light, one cannot but admire King's almost off-hand dismissal of that 'fit of fire' (judgment day) that, 'once off', will allow him to resume his interrupted relationship with his wife. Compare King's confident certitude with Coventry Patmore's more nervous

interrogation, in 'The Day After Tomorrow' (Patmore 2004, p. 31), of what such a reunion might entail:

But shall I not, with ne'er a sign, perceive,  
Whilst her sweet hands I hold,  
The myriad threads and meshes manifold  
Which Love shall round her weave:  
The pulse in that vein making alien pause  
And varying beats from this;  
Down each long finger felt, a differing strand  
Of silvery welcome bland;  
And in her breezy palm  
And silken wrist,  
Beneath the touch of my like numerous bliss  
Complexly kiss'd,  
A diverse and distinguishable calm?

Patmore intuits that something at least of their former relationship will be lost upon their reunion. Her bland calmness, her silvery fingers and breezy palms are disconcerting, are they not? Patmore, through his series of elegies, plots his mourning course, changes his wife's identity, sheds a belief in her corporeality and prepares for the farewell that will arrive several poems later, in the poem titled 'Tired Memory' (2004, p.47):

The stony rock of death's insensibility  
Well'd yet awhile with honey of thy love  
And then was dry;  
Nor could thy picture, nor thine empty glove,  
Nor all thy kind, long letters, nor the band  
Which really spann'd  
Thy body chaste and warm,  
Thenceforward move  
Upon the stony rock their wearied charm.  
At last, then, thou wast dead.

Wallace Stevens was clear that fictions could be self-consciously employed without impairing their efficacy. In fact, he thought recognition of the constructed nature of fictions was essential. In his *Letters*, he recalls telling a student that humanity had reached the point at which it could no longer truly believe in anything, unless first recognising that that belief was a fiction (1966, p. 430).

The student said that that was an impossibility, that there was no such thing as believing in something that one knew was not true. It is obvious, however, that we are doing that all the time.

And one place where humanity has been doing so longest, to greatest effect, and with maximum efficacy is in elegiac poetry. It is not merely that the content of the elegy itself is fictional, the very act of creation is artifactual, even fabricated. The elegist is acutely conscious of this and alternately disparaging of and accepting of the process. In the 16th century, Edmund Spenser is able to lament the inadequacy of ‘ydle words ... And verses vaine’ in ‘Astrophel’, his elegy for the poet and soldier Sir Philip Sidney. Yet almost instantly, he expresses a parenthetical contradiction: ‘(yet verses are not vaine)’ (Spenser 1943, p. 180), an acknowledgment of the efficacy of the artefact he is creating. Sacks observes (1987, p. 39) that Spenser’s poetry is

sewn through with [such] moments in which language not only draws attention to its own fabricated nature but by extension questions the very ideals or principles ... in whose construction it plays so crucial a role.

Two and a half centuries after Spenser, Tennyson is explicit about the contribution made by the *act of writing* itself (as opposed to *what is written*), to the efficacy of elegy. More than once in ‘In Memoriam’ he reflects on the comfort to be had from the simple act of writing, the creation of the poetic artefact (1900, p. 9):

In words, like weeds, I'll wrap me o'er,  
Like coarsest clothes against the cold.

To a modern reader, it is not automatically or intuitively Tennyson’s Christian faith, and its consolations, that appear to bring him relief (indeed, his faith gutters and flares again and again over the long course of the poem), but the act of putting one word after another, then another: the fabrication of the poem itself.

Both Spenser and Tennyson understood that what they were doing was quite distinct from the drafting of consolatory tracts, or the penning of eulogies enumerating great deeds and fine characters. They were employing fictions for serious, often personal purposes and for sophisticated literary effect. Spenser does so by invoking pastoral conventions and mythical personages – stylised tropes to help shape and direct the nationwide mourning for the hero Sidney. Tennyson does so by carefully arranging, *post facto*, his Arthur Hallam fragments, written over a period of years, into a coherent and successful (but on one level entirely fictional) ‘working through’ of the stages of bereavement, from despair to acceptance. Tennyson, moreover, establishes the fictional nature of his enterprise right from the outset. His prologue, written last of all the fragments, but setting the scene for all, is addressed to the ‘Strong Son of God, immortal Love’, a God whose very existence is, the next instant, cast into doubt with the words: ‘Believing where we cannot prove’.

Interestingly, although ‘In Memoriam’ is thought of as an ostensibly ‘Christian’ elegy, Tennyson’s religious ambivalence suffuses many of the poem’s cantos. Yet this ambivalence does not destroy the poem’s credibility or its believable narrative of a grieving man traversing the ground of grief to arrive, at last, at acceptance, relinquishment of his friend, and a resumption of regular life. Even when the reader is most certain that Tennyson is marshalling his Christian consolations with a glance askance, fingers crossed, the poem’s power is undiminished. T.S. Eliot’s 1936 essay on ‘In Memoriam’ explicitly addresses Tennyson’s ambivalent faith. He comments (Eliot 1950, p. 294),

In Memoriam can, I think, justly be called a religious poem, but for another reason than that which made it seem religious to his contemporaries. It is not religious because of the quality of its faith, but because of the quality of its doubt. Its faith is a poor thing, but its doubt is a very intense experience.

Eliot claims that Tennyson has the temperament of a mystic and that his expressions of faith are not nearly as conventional as his contemporaries might have assumed (p. 292):

Tennyson is distressed by the idea of a mechanical universe; he is naturally, in lamenting his friend, teased by the hope of immortality and reunion beyond death. Yet the renewal craved for seems at best a continuance, or a substitute for the joys of friendship upon earth. His desire for immortality never is quite the desire for Eternal Life; his concern is for the loss of man rather than for the gain of God.

There are similarities here with King's confident insistence, clothed in the costuming of Christian consolation, that he will be reunited with his wife, a reunion in which God seems to play a very minor role.

In relation to 'In Memoriam', Shaw (1994, p. 4) argues that it is

precisely because neither scepticism nor faith can be 'proved', [that] there is nothing to prevent Tennyson's affirming the conventional validity of any religious belief he chooses to entertain, as long as he entertains it self-critically and provisionally.

And, I might add, as long as the belief he entertains 'suffices'. The popularity of 'In Memoriam' today, more than a century and a half after it was written (as recently as 2011 the poem was the subject of a 45-minute BBC radio documentary by British author Melvyn Bragg), attests that for many it does suffice.

Two decades after the death of Wallace Stevens, Ernest Becker re-explored the notion of fictions – which he collectively labelled the 'vital lie' – as part of his meditation on the denial of death. Becker (1973) argues that, unlike other animals, humans cannot live entirely in the moment, entirely by instinct. They live burdened with an awareness of time past, and time future. Human beings alone (apparently) of the earth's creatures, know that there are worlds beyond their own small island: a planet, a galaxy, a universe, perhaps even a multiplicity of universes. The *experiential* burden of such knowledge, Becker (1973) says, is appalling. An individual can only survive such a life by lying to himself, about himself, and about the reality of inescapable mortality (pp. 50-51). The lie is 'vital' because it is a 'necessary and basic dishonesty about oneself and one's whole situation', a 'lie we have fashioned in order to live securely and serenely' (p. 55).

There are kinder words for lies, even vital ones: supreme fictions; inferential entities; false surmises; verses (not) vaine; or simply ‘what will suffice’. Whatever we choose to call it, the material from which the fictions of elegiac poetry are fashioned is always, and inevitably, *the word*. Bentham argues that it is to *language alone* that ‘fictitious entities owe their existence; their impossible yet indisputable existence’ (Ogden 1932, p. 15). A fiction must be conjured, it must be magicked from somewhere, and Bentham states that it is language alone that enables fictitious entities to be created, named, dressed in the garb of, and placed upon the level of, real entities (Ogden 1932, p. 16). As Marjorie Garber (2011, p. 253) puts it,

... language makes meaning ... it does not merely reflect it. Things that do not exist are often brought brilliantly to life through figures of speech, so it is that the figures are primary, and the referents, the facts, that follow in their train. In large forms like mythology (or religion) and in smaller ones like individual figures or metaphors, concepts are created by the imaginative leaps that we call poetry or fiction or rhetoric.

Our fictions may be necessary, they must ‘suffice’, they may even be beautiful, but they need not be facile or entirely comfortable. In the world of elegy they may be as confronting as William Wordsworth’s horrified address to his dead daughter in ‘Surprised by Joy’, or Thomas Hardy’s repeated conjuring of his estranged wife’s ghost in the Emma poems. Frank Kermode, writing in the 1960s, agrees with many of the theorists so far cited, that to ‘make sense of their span’ humans need ‘fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems’ (1967, p. 7). But in a wonderful passage, he argues that if these fictions are too ‘easy’ they will be rejected as simple escapism.

‘We want [fictions] not only to console but to make discoveries of the hard truth here and now,’ he writes (1967, p. 179).

We do not feel they are doing this if we cannot see the shadow of the gable, or hear the discoveries of dissonance, the word set against the word. The books which seal off long perspectives, which sever us from our losses, which represent the world of potency as a world of act, these are the books that, when the drug wears off, go onto the dump with all the other empty bottles.

Elegy is a poetry of ‘hard truth, here and now’. The words and images that stay with us are often not the soft consolations, but the brutal revelations. The lines from ‘In Memoriam’ we best remember are Tennyson’s aghast recognition of remorseless nature, ‘red in tooth and claw’, and his description of himself creeping, like a guilty thing, to stand at daybreak before his dead friend’s door, only to see, ‘ghastly thro’ the drizzling rain’ the blank day breaking on the bald street. In Ben Jonson’s ‘On My First Son’, it is not the conventions of Christian solace we remember most, but the father, pretending that the solution to his present pain is simply to vow never to love so deeply again. The consolations, such as they are, are barely uttered before they are hollowed out. And yet, his conviction, the oath he swears, is also a fiction. The love of a parent for a child cannot be regretted, nor can the heart be protected from future love, any more than Wordsworth can genuinely pierce the veil to address his dead daughter. His address is a fiction, but a necessary one – a fiction that the veil, while opaque, is not entirely impenetrable.

One poet writing at the beginning of the modern era, who did not shy away from hard truths, or from the consciously fictional nature of elegy, was Thomas Hardy. As was discussed in Chapter 2, Hardy’s numerous elegies for his first wife, Emma (most of them collected in *Poems of 1912–13*), were written against the background of the couple’s virtual estrangement at the time of Emma’s death. This estrangement seems to have heightened the intensity of Hardy’s grief, and his feelings of guilt. Ought he have noticed her decline? Why had he not sought rapprochement when he could? What had happened, to extinguish their early and mutual passion – an attraction so strong that they wed in opposition to the wishes of both of their families (Tomalin 2010, p. x)?

Fictions – conscious fictions – are critical to the power of Hardy’s elegies. Foremost, there is the fiction of the ghost that haunts so many of the Emma poems – the ‘phantom of his own

figuring', Hardy called it. Then there is the romantic conjuring of the young Emma, who is repeatedly, almost *cinematically* evoked, with her swan neck, arch looks, heightened colour, the wind-tugged tress of hair, and that famous, original, air-blue gown – a fictionalised Emma, conjured to replace the doughty, dissatisfied matron of later years. The use of Virgil's words, *Veteris vestigia flammae*, as an epigraph to *Poems of 1912–13* is apt: traces of an old flame (or, by an alternative reading, *scars* of an old flame). Finally, for Hardy, there is the fiction of transformation, so common to elegy through the ages, which sees his and Emma's love captured and preserved for eternity in the 'colour and cast' of the 'Primaeval rocks' near Castle Boterel – the evidence, so apparently necessary to Hardy, that 'we two passed' (Tomalin 2010, p. 25). Where other elegists transform the loved dead into inanimate or distant objects, Hardy transforms a dead love.

These are strange elegies – rendered odder, perhaps, by Hardy's evident need to revert to memory and nostalgic imagination to recall the one he mourned, since he could not mourn the wife he had actually lost. This gives the Emma poems an aliveness – but an uncannily *fictional* aliveness.

Hardy wrote other elegies, of course, and in these we can detect something more conventionally akin to Stevens' supreme fictions. In 'The Darkling Thrush', Hardy's epochal elegy for the 19th century, written more than a decade before the Emma poems, the poet articulates a different kind of fictional consolation. Even in the midst of his anxiety about the state of the world and the passing of an era, there is room for a rush of transcendent hope, a supreme fiction of sorts. Amid the desolate dregs of a hard winter, an old thrush pours out his ecstatic song. Where another poet might have put the song in the throat of a young bird, symbolic of the return of spring and new life (a trope found in many elegies), Hardy locates his supreme fiction instead in the song of a frail, draggled morsel of bird-flesh, perched

among the dead twigs. But there is no pathos in Hardy's thrush. Rather, there is hope in something unarticulated, unperceived, unproveable (Hardy 2009, p. 33):

So little cause for carolings  
Of such ecstatic sound  
Was written on terrestrial things  
Afar or nigh around,  
That I could think there trembled through  
His happy goodnight air  
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
And I was unaware.

This is a modest hope, to be sure – fashioned, to be cruelly precise, on the basis of a small bird's instinct for song, but equal in intensity to Wallace Stevens' woman singing by the shore, creating the world of which she sings.

In 'God's Funeral', too, Hardy concludes with a 'pale yet positive gleam' on the horizon, a 'small light – / Swelling somewhat ...' (1979, pp. 326-329). This is a barely sufficient consolation and no substitute, perhaps, for the deity Hardy could no longer keep alive. But it is something upon which a poet might fix his mortal eye and not so different in essence, one might think, to the new sun with which Milton concludes 'Lycidas', or the sunlight in which Tennyson transfixes Hallam, towards the end of 'In Memoriam'. It is also similar to Wallace Stevens' '... light on the candle tearing against the wick', seeking to become a part of the 'celestial possible', in his poem on the approaching death of George Santayana, 'To an Old Philosopher in Rome' (1990, p. 509). It is a painful but vital sense of the transcendent that turns hard truth into a thing of beauty and power that we can read or hear without flinching. It is the heightened instant of recognition that Seamus Heaney (1999, p. 289), conjuring his mother's deathbed scene, describes with such intensity:

Then she was dead,  
The searching for a pulsebeat was abandoned  
And we all knew one thing by being there.  
The space we stood around had been emptied  
Into us to keep, it penetrated  
Clearances that suddenly stood open.

High cries were felled and a pure change happened.

For Hardy, for Heaney, for Stevens, ‘what will suffice’, the supreme fiction, is often a modest one: the merest gleam on the horizon; a swirl of colour in a rock; a burst of song from a bird that will not live to see the season of which it sings; a moment of transcendent, if only apprehended, pure change. Yet amid the confusion and sadness of loss and the hard truth, there is a capacity for joy – and, importantly, a perceived future. It is the ‘pasture new’ trodden by Milton’s grieving shepherd at the end of ‘Lycidas’ and the normality of family weddings and the returning routines that are embraced by Tennyson at the end of ‘In Memoriam’. For each of these elegists the new pasture is carefully paced out, and sown with fictions capable of bearing the weight of the poet’s footsteps.

The fictions so sown have changed remarkably little over the centuries, although the manner of their presentation has reflected the period in which individual poems were written. There is the interlocutory fiction that it is possible to address the dead one last time. There is the fiction that verse is not in vain, that solace is possible, that the sheer, hard beauty of language can allow us to make sense of our lifespan. And there is the fiction that this act of elegising, this act of creation, is also an act of preservation – although the language in which it is written will one day fall from human use and human memory; and although the paper upon which it is written will perish.

Fictions they may be, yet they allow the elegist to perform the necessary work of mourning. And their ritual nature, their seriousness, and their utility, lend weight to elegy’s claim to be considered as performative utterance. Indeed, as we have already seen, many of the types of utterances that would have sat squarely under Austin’s idea of ‘the performative’ depend just as fundamentally upon fictions. What *actually changes* when a child is named through the performative utterance of Christening, or when a couple is married by virtue of the speaking of a ritual form of words? If a chemist were to be asked to detect the chemical change in

bread and wine, brought about by the Eucharist, what report could he or she make? Yet the Roman Catholic participating in that ceremony (even the Roman Catholic chemist) has no doubt of the transformation that has taken place, and the married couple *knows* itself to be married, and therefore altered. The child, upon naming, takes on an individual and social identity it lacked before.

‘What the spirit wants it creates, even if it has to do so in a fiction,’ Wallace Stevens writes in a letter to Hi Simons, in 1943 (1966, p. 438). Our understanding of reality, then, becomes ‘a thing seen by the mind, / Not that which is but that which is apprehended’ (Stevens 1990, p. 468). Not ‘grim reality but reality grimly seen and spoken in paradisal parlance’ (p. 475).

It is this ‘paradise parlance’, constructed of fictions and passed like a charm through the millennia from poet to poet, that allows the work of mourning to be conducted through poetic performative utterance. What we believe to be true, however fictional it may be, allows us to deal with what would otherwise be ‘grim’ and often unmanageable. Our ‘supreme fictions’, however hard they may be to define, are a crucial part of our language, our lives and our ways of addressing loss.

## Chapter 6 Conclusion: It must be abstract; it must change; it must give pleasure

*A fictive covering  
Weaves always glistening from the heart and mind.*

(Wallace Stevens, Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction)

Late in life, Peter Porter spoke to *Guardian* reporter Sarah Crown about his poem ‘An Exequy’ – an emotionally raw yet highly wrought elegy, written after the suicide of his first wife. Of the act of elegising, Porter told *The Guardian* (Crown 2009, n.p.):

It’s a question of the mind being forced to find a way of dealing with something, not in extenuation and not in therapy, but as a means of presenting the material to itself. I was writing for myself. Poetry is its own answer, its own end.

As the preceding chapters have demonstrated, elegy is certainly about ‘find[ing] a way of dealing with something’, and it may also be an answer, and perhaps even an end (or a movement towards an end) for the poet. Not for nothing did Stevens describe the poet, in ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’, as ‘[t]he spokesman at our bluntest barriers’ and the ‘speaker / Of a speech only a little of the tongue’ (1990, p. 397).

As someone granted the powers of delegation, authorised to speak elegiacally by his proximity to and love for his dead wife – and by his profession – Porter reaches for the fictions that enable the performative utterance to be made, and the poetry to make the utterance work. These are the fictions common to elegy: that the dead can be addressed and interrogated, apologised to and remonstrated with; that lasting succour might be found; and that lasting memorialisation might be achieved in the artefact of the poem. From the evidence of his own lines, Porter (1983, p. 247) is persuaded that his wife is now unreachable and unrecoverable, and that it is too late for speech:

The channels of our lives are blocked,  
The hand is stopped upon the clock.

Yet, his direct address to his wife is so persuasive, so intimate, so *quiet*, that the reader can almost imagine her there, attentive and listening, as he conjures the day of her death (1983, p. 248):

*O scala enigmatica*  
I'll climb up to the attic where  
The curtain of your life was drawn  
Some time between despair and dawn –  
I'll never know with what halt steps  
You mounted to this plain eclipse

The sombre procession makes its way, complete with the *scala enigmata* – the musical mode devised by Giuseppe Verdi at the end of the 19th century for use in his 'Ave Maria' (Randel 2003 p. 757), and which combines elements of major and minor progressions, challenging the composer – and now the poet – to find ways of locating harmony.

Like elegists before and since, Porter protests that his words cannot work, even as he writes them. He brushes aside any notion that something might come of this endeavour, with his curt reference in 'An Exequy' to the 'pointlessness of poetry'. Indeed, in an introduction commissioned by the Poetry Book Society to preface *The Cost of Seriousness*, the volume in which 'An Exequy' and other poems dealing with his wife's death were published, Porter says the main concern of the book was the inability of poetry to alter human circumstances or alleviate human distress (1978, n.p.). Yet, he wrote the poems anyway. For poetry's own end, as poetry's own answer. And perhaps unknowingly, or unconsciously, for his own answers, his own ends, and for ours, four decades later – strangers to his wife, strangers to their relationship, strangers to his particular grief, but sharers in his experience nonetheless.

The stages of mourning's journey can be long and steep. 'An Exequy' recounts how, five months after his wife's death, Porter's nights are invaded by strange dreams, 'black creatures of the upper deep'. He sees his '[d]ear wife, lost beast, beleaguered child' as a 'stranded monster' and 'Andromeda upon her knees'. She is 'a thing / out of the box of imagining'

(Porter 1978, p. 246). But after the strange dreams, a stranger calm descends. The poem is its own answer, its own end (p. 248). It knows the way:

The rooms and days we wandered through  
Shrink in my mind to one – there you  
Lie quite absorbed by peace – the calm  
Which life could not provide is balm  
In death. Unseen by me, you look  
Past bed and stairs and half-read book  
Eternally upon your home,  
The end of pain, the left alone.

Porter may protest at the inadequacy of poetry to assuage distress, but there is such a sense of release and resolution and forgiveness and farewell in these lines – notwithstanding the traumatic event underlying them – that it is impossible to share the poet’s dismissal of his own power, and impossible to believe that the poem, however much it might have been its ‘own answer’ and its ‘own end’, was not also an answer and progress towards resolution for the elegist.

The preceding pages, and the pages of poetry that make up the manuscript of poetry that follows, are the outcomes of my attempt to understand the enduring power of elegiac poetry. From the doggerel of the mass-produced sympathy card to the drop-down menu of ‘suitable’ funeral poems on the mortician’s website, elegiac verse has adapted to a clinical, corporate, commoditised and (increasingly) secular world. But elegy itself has not become clinical, corporate, or commoditised, and even if much of it has, by necessity, dispensed with God, it has not fully dispensed with faith, and it continues to conjure its necessary fictions. It does, essentially, what elegy has always done – constructs small cairns of words, laboriously built but also iterable.

The poems in the manuscript that accompanies this exegesis make up the creative response to my research question. They are not all elegies. However, most are poems that touch at least tangentially (and usually quite directly) upon death and which invoke the elegiac mode, often

laterally or implicitly rather than directly. They are an integral product of my research and their drafting frequently prompted a new line of exegetical inquiry. In turn, the exegetical inquiry gave rise to additional poems. Some are attempts to explore particular aspects of the elegist's challenge. Others consider the broader notions raised: the curious power of naming; the permanence of memorialisation; the conviction that nature itself partakes in our grief (and the equally compelling conviction that it does nothing of the sort and is oblivious to such irrelevancies). Some, inevitably, are poems occasioned by actual death. Indeed, it was actual death – multiple actual deaths in a seemingly compressed timeframe – that first pricked my curiosity about why elegy still works.

For the most part, the deaths that touched my life were ordinary deaths, expected deaths, even, on occasion, awaited deaths. Some, however, were deaths that triggered that familiar, post-penicillin-age affront to modern sensibilities: a child, nowadays, is not meant to predecease a parent. Another death of which I write, a grievously affecting death, though daily expected, was the death of a pet. There were multiple deaths and therefore many funerals and farewells. One was a Catholic mass, with a widow keening; another was a garden service at the crematorium where a cardboard casket was plastered with a colleague's newspaper by-lines and there was music by Monty Python. Another colleague committed suicide and at his cathedral funeral a young, male mourner sang Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah* (a song about sex and the loss of desire, David and Bathsheba and Samson and Delilah). Then a daughter of the dead man read Auden's 'Funeral Blues' – the last stanzas reworked, by a phrase or two, into upbeat affirmation.

Afterwards, I asked myself why that had seemed to matter so much, as I had sat there, flinching, in the cathedral, listening. I remember thinking: *you can't mess with Auden*. But of course, you *can* mess with Auden. It might not always work, but you can mess with any

elegy: the preceding chapters show that ‘messing’ is fundamental to the form and its continuing vitality, whether that is through the citation by one elegist of his predecessors, the re-use of meanings and layering of new meanings upon old conventions, or the challenging of a convention that ends in the convention’s startling (or creeping) reinvention. This is the thread of black ink that bleeds backwards, linking Canadian Anne Carson, writing her 21st-century elegiac outpouring for her estranged brother, to the Roman Catullus, in the 3rd century BCE, writing his spare ‘hail and farewell’ for his own brother. Thus is the ritual re-invented, the performative utterance repeated and kept real. It is Blaise Pascal’s ritual – pray, and you will believe – re-worked for the occasion: elegise, and you will grieve.

In *Gilgamesh*, at the heart of an epic that is nearly the oldest extant literature on earth, the hard questions are already posed: how do I survive mourning of the death of someone I love; and then, how do I acquaint myself with, and survive, the paralysing, consuming knowledge that I face the same fate? And yet, most of us *do* survive. Henry King survived, going on to become Bishop of Chichester. Peter Porter remarried. Ben Jonson went on to have another son – another Ben – and to lose him too. Thomas Hardy wed again. Tennyson became Poet Laureate. Coventry Patmore was twice remarried.

Patmore’s ‘The Day After Tomorrow’, cited earlier, was one of a number of poems he wrote to record the trajectory of his mourning for Emily. In their combined movements these discrete poems in some ways mirror the ‘compendium’ version of the work of mourning Tennyson gives us in ‘In Memoriam’. ‘The Day After Tomorrow’ was written in the first flush of Patmore’s shock, when his wife’s death was not yet real. Yet its superficial confidence in an eventual reunion was already tempered by Patmore’s half-suppressed comprehension that on that day, when he might expect the delirium of reunion, he would also detect in his restored wife ‘[a] diverse and distinguishable calm’ (Patmore 2004, p. 31). There

would be no resumption of their former happy relations. An awareness of the thoroughness of the breach brought about by death was already beginning to percolate into his consciousness and his poetry.

Patmore went on, in *The Unknown Eros*, to publish several poems for Emily that can be linked to a number of different stages of mourning. These culminate, as we saw in the previous chapter, with somewhat disconcerting self-awareness and self-consciousness, in a poem that encapsulates the denouement of the work of mourning – the moment at which the mourner accepts death's finality. The denial is over and the bargaining done with. Emily's picture ceases to speak and its eyes no longer follow the mourner about the room. The glove becomes just a deflated glove, not an outline of her hand. The sash that once wound around her breathing waist becomes simply material – perhaps even immaterial. Three years after Emily's death, Patmore twitched Milton's shepherd's 'mantle blue' and set out for 'fresh woods and pastures new'. He remarried (2004, p. 51).

And so the fear, which is love's chilly dawn,  
Flush'd faintly upon lids that droop'd like thine,  
And made me weak,  
By thy delusive likeness doubly drawn,  
And Nature's long suspended breath of flame  
Persuading soft, and whispering Duty's name,  
Awhile to smile and speak.

There is a glancing sense of betrayal in this poem, but the betrayal seems to be of his previous, determined constancy, rather than a betrayal of his dead wife. He writes that he 'daily said / Many and many a fond, unfeeling prayer, / To keep my vows of faith to thee from harm. / In vain' (pp. 47-48). The libido has been withdrawn and has been attached to someone else.

The phases of grief articulated by Tennyson, Patmore and others are, as I have demonstrated, more or less the same as the stages of mourning articulated by modern psychology – stages

that culminate in what Freud identified as a detachment of emotional energy from the dead person. Poets have been enacting this psychological work for millennia. From Gilgamesh's unknown author, the mantle has been passed on down the ages, queried, tested, shrugged reluctantly over the shoulders, only to be twitched back finally in relief.

Even as British poet Christopher Reid adapts the elegiac tone while appealing to the better nature of his dead wife, the actor Lucinda Gane, in his poem sequence 'The Flowers of Crete', so he also invokes this ancient elegaic tradition (2009, p. 12):

Glib analogies!  
Makeshift rhymes!  
Please pardon the crimes  
    of your husband the poet  
as he mazes the pages  
of his notebook, in pursuit  
    of some safe way out.

Despite his misgivings, Reid elegises, instead of simply abandoning his poem and burning the evidence. He doesn't really believe this is a 'safe way out', any more than Porter might have conceived of his poetic exploration of his wife's suicide as 'safe', or any more than Hardy would have regarded the (unflattering) soul-baring of his complicated mourning for Emma as 'safe'. Each chooses to elegise anyway. Elegy is, by its nature, unsafe and necessary. It is poetry written *in extremis*, formed, as Stevens perhaps inferred, '[o]ut of our lives to keep us in our death' (1990, p. 434).

And that perhaps is why, like other acts committed *in extremis*, it calls upon the individual's innermost imaginings, the heart's deep if sometimes fabricated beliefs, to make sense of something that is seemingly without sense. Elegy is always entering a terrain that cannot be competently navigated without fictions – small and large accommodations that render our experiential reality bearable, liveable, iterable, shareable, survivable. Christopher Reid (2009,

p. 25) invokes Auden's 'Barcarolle' (from the libretto for Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*)

to make a similar point:

'Gently little boat,  
across the ocean float':  
Auden's words,  
which Stravinsky's ear  
slanted, tilted, made more  
liltingly awkward.  
Out of the whole  
ragbag repertoire  
of songs she loved to sing,  
this lullaby-barcarolle  
might have been just the thing  
if the bed had been a boat,  
and the boat going anywhere.

But then, after establishing that death is not a journey and that his wife's hospice bed is  
'moored fast' to the physical fact of her dying, he concedes (p. 25):

Only in that space  
of the mind where the wilful  
metaphors thrive  
has it now pushed  
out into open sea  
and begun to travel  
beyond time and place,  
never to arrive.

And that is the tough reality of the elegy. Without the part of the mind where the wilful  
metaphors thrive, there can be no journey, no performative act. That is what the poet  
achieves.

As Wallace Stevens (1990, pp. 398-399) expressed it in 'Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction:

[t]he difficultest rigor is forthwith,  
On the image of what we see, to catch from that  
  
Irrational moment its unreasoning,  
As when the sun comes rising, when the sea  
Clears deeply, when the moon hangs on the wall

Of heaven-haven. These are not things transformed.  
Yet we are shaken by them as if they were.  
We reason about them with a later reason.

As Stevens intuited, like every other poet, and in particular every elegist, nothing is transformed, nothing is altered, nothing is undone by poetry, least of all death. Yet everything *can* be. Our perception of things can be altered, and in that sense, everything is altered. Yes, we are shaken, *as if* things have altered. We cannot comprehend. Yet we seize (actively) from such irrational moments an *unreasoning* that we shift, with a conscious click, into *later reasoning*.

And in reasoning about these things, with that 'later reason', so too we extract what comforts we can, and assign them what meanings we must.

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**Things I've thought to tell you since I saw you last**

This manuscript and the accompanying exegesis, 'Yet verses are not vaine: elegy as performative utterance in a secular age', are submitted for the Doctor of Philosophy in Communication of the University of Canberra.

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## Future Anterior

## **Future anterior**

The trees wear their mortality  
bare to the breezes,  
skeletal behind their fig-leaf of leaves.

Their bones show brittle  
and decay nestles in pits of their  
stretched limbs.

Even the Huon, reptilian with age,  
shows in standing  
a stricken shape.

In the quiet breath of midday  
it is majesty and ruin under one crown.

In high wind it wrings its hands  
in a fussy froth, saying

*I will have died.*

## Irregular

The verb 'to mourn' has too many manners,  
is uttered by ladies fingering old photos  
or sighing over letters from the front.

There's nothing mannerly in this:  
my breath punched out at the traffic lights;  
surging from sleep with a throatful of horror.

I need a verb with steep sides  
and a brutal rap of consonants.

A cliff of a verb  
to knock against, with fists.

## **Aubade**

It's mostly in this falling season,  
walking out early,  
that I've seen the horizon's bright seam  
in those slow seconds to dawning,  
the thread of incandescence  
that ruptures into morning.  
And then, so quick, the spatial shift:  
hardening light about my feet.  
Daybreaks past and future stretch  
each side of one indrawn breath.

## Breath – Relief

The air tonight seems made  
half of sighs  
half of held breath:

one part expectation  
one part grief.

If it were colder  
my exhalation might wreath  
your turned-away temple;

adhere, a faint frieze  
telling of love beyond telling

and beyond retrieval.  
I expect you any minute –  
outside of belief.

## **In Miss Havisham's garden**

The swimming pool of collected summers  
is opaque lime under charcoal clouds.  
Loose skeins of butterflies unweave in air.

We have been dismantling your traces,  
putting away tools that fitted your palm  
like a puzzle completing,  
smoothing webs from mowing machines  
while sasanqua relinquish  
their sogged and blousy buds.

In the soil are the marks of you still:  
spade slice; impress of hand about the bulb.  
Last year while roses whetted new thorns  
to be tempered by the frost  
your rooms reeked of winter jonquils.

Now the jonquils are cocooned.  
Drowned mice are dredged from the pool.  
Sasanqua drop and shatter on dropping.  
Twice daily I sweep the terrace of their flesh.

## Elizabeth Bennet and me

At least I lived.

Elizabeth Bennet never did  
though the words she said  
are etched in common memory.

Easy enough  
when your words are few  
and you're eternally 20

with your future more than equal  
to an unwritten sequel  
while I'm (momentarily) 50.

## Commerce with the dead

I hold no commerce with the dead.

All I have lost are lost for good.

I pray the saints to intercede.

They just gaze kindly from their frames.

I saw the shrivelled thumb of one,

sought answers there, found none.

And yet, on days of high dismay

I seek again those swooning saints,

a fiction that the dead persist,

that faith, if fierce, can buy delay,

then reason plucks me from the brink

and back to bleak I'm led.

## **Cold zeal**

Eyesight fails, and the compass  
of the immediate world shrinks.  
Once, glances were cast out  
far and with a practiced flick  
and the bounty was hauled back in beauty –  
in ice etchings on a paling fence  
or the oily swirl  
of a river's revealed currents,  
brief looks of interest from strangers,  
the complexities of mist.

## Sound and silence

With what sounds shall I drown  
this new silence?

The drowsy chortle  
of a pigeon-house,  
or one low throttled burr  
of a cat on a sill?

The remembered babble my babies made,  
or a west wind testing  
at this gappy door?

Shall I try unaccustomed song,  
cracked from unpracticed cords:  
do re            ah mi!  
or a shout of radio from another room?

What words are for howling  
so the howl is made monumental,  
is not consumed in the stating  
of the fact  
of your going?

## **Avalanche**

I fear death by drowning.

Also by fire,

slow cancer,

or swift brain bleed.

Mid-summer

or else in May.

I fear dying alone

or watched.

I fear death on a Tuesday

or other day.

Car crash,

crane drop,

the plunging plane.

## **Birthday video**

I don't recognise anyone.  
Not you, beardless and smiling,  
with sadness in your eyes  
and babies like koala young  
attached to your back,  
nor the one that must be me –  
I would have been there  
on a day like that.

There's no fond nostalgia in this –  
*don't we look young!*  
*haven't we gone to fat!*  
Just fretfulness  
at friends lost gone  
or forgotten gone, good-riddance gone  
or dead gone,  
and my dead father's voice,  
which I'd forgotten I loved,  
just singing a foolish song.

## Caul

First to pass this way today  
I break through wetly  
night-spun webs  
and make for my face  
a silken caul.

Midwives tell  
that those born capped  
will never die of drowning.  
But still I gag,  
nostrils grabbing,  
eyelashes frantic  
as insects  
fallen into suspension.

Even when  
the sunlight comes,  
alarming each trip-wire,  
still they rip and clutch,  
laying on crossed,  
clammy hands,  
saying  
*there are more ways  
to die dry  
than there are to drown.*

## **There is no ease in water**

Even glass-cast, blood-warm,  
it takes just a spoonful to perfuse the lung.  
Face-down, I watch grey things scuttle  
in a swirl of gusted sand  
and listen to my breath, intubated, rattle.

All my growing years,  
routine as bath or bed or prayer  
was the night sound of your muffled wet cough  
and my mother's percussive fists,  
as she pressed your perished bellows  
into another year or two of breath.

Beyond the coral, surf is thudding.  
The sun refracts in molten folds.  
A small fish holds itself steady,  
with fractional flicks of gauzy fins,  
and looks me in the mask.  
His gills gulp the golden water.

## Painting the wind

Each few seconds  
the wind bulges.

Glass cannot keep it  
walls cannot

out of my sleep  
my sighing

the sound and compression  
the pressure of it.

You wrote, once,  
about painting the wind.

I cannot write it now  
without you oozing in.

## Terror management theory

this singularity

we carry

like an egg or a rock

hating the weight

fearful of a knock

but it's hard to

live so mindfully

and get much done

so mostly it's like

breath or pulse:

forgotten

till it's not

## **This loss**

is not to share,  
must be furtive  
and unsaid.

There is no headstone  
for estrangement,  
no dead.

No postings in the press  
no public rites.  
But at the thought

of you  
my lung  
is tight laced

with black crepe,  
bombazine,  
the light-sucking stuff.

## Revenant

How now, are you  
back then  
after some months  
forgetting?  
The dead hand  
on my morning,  
the prick to my dream.  
I had thought this  
worked out, and  
you seen right through.

## **Unseasonal**

This season again, and so many are unseasonably absent. Things are bent about. The weather runs hot and cold. We make a care package of cold turkey, ham and the trim. On the ward, they've drawn an ink border about your infection like an old and seeping empire on a school globe. They'll tell, tomorrow, if it continues its march. Too few veins left after two years of trying, they attempt your bony foot, hurt you, fail anyway.

## Pre-ceremonial

All the way  
across town  
following the hearse  
we are on display  
behind the windows  
of the family wagon  
washed for the occasion.

Only three streets  
from there to there  
and we travel them so slow  
with headlights on  
though it's summer  
with cicadas.

Three streets of strangers  
standing sentinel  
hands clutching papers  
snatched from the lawn  
or the dog's lead, tensed  
against misbehaviour.  
Joggers awkward with ear-buds  
and songs suspended  
and men with idling,  
bubbling mowers.

We travel them so slow  
with the headlights on  
and the streets are filled  
with stilled figures  
stumbling into something  
not quite a part of them.

## **Pluto**

We knew it would end like this. At the rough and ragged end I even dreamed it, looked for it, forward to it. It took one hour to wish it all undone. This is not you being on Pluto, not you with a flat phone battery, not you ignoring me.

## **About my cat**

For reasons unexplained my tea is gouts of silent rising steam. Summer evening, with a beanie on my head and a cold patch on my lap. Absurd, but I worry about the steady rain, how it will trickle down that foot or two like a drip down a neck, to where we put her, just now, after so long being dry and here and warm.

### **Year three**

Descending to the coast, she detects through a whistle of car window the same outbreathed eucalypt that eddied hotly across a fibro room at Pretty Beach, the afternoon of your first crisis, blood frightening on a white pillow. Flowering gum, with a hot, drab hanging of leaves. Disinfectant. In the glove box, a disc you burned on a boozy night. Your voice cracks through cheap speakers. The dogs lift theirs from the backseat, in counterpoint.

## **Atheist in the cathedral**

That spring,  
as every September,  
the sky was deceitful

blue, buds knocked up  
by imperative rhythms,  
knocked down by ice.

The worm was  
at me, mouthing.  
Fretful morning showers

had me tasting rust.

## Surface and shadow

Leaner,  
far longer at first light,  
a Giacometti striding,  
you pace me,  
not grating or creaking or tripping  
but rippling over the rocky hill.

At the summit we stop:  
I to breathe; you because  
you're shackled to me.

The sun goes higher  
quicker than you think.  
You shorten, plumpen,  
more like me now.

Slump here awhile, then,  
grass for hair  
a broken parrot wing  
scarlet at your brain pan,  
small pebbles  
where a heart.

## **Veteris vestigia flammae**

Sometimes there beckons  
from cold morning ashes  
a parched, bleached afterimage  
of what was consumed –

a gnawed bone,  
bent as if for kissing,  
the shape-ghost of a log,  
long sinews miraculously intact.

But no warmth –  
at the touch of a finger  
all atomises to creaking dust.  
The fragile softness disgusts.

## **Existential sub-editing**

Ambulance delays deaths of crash couple  
by 12 and 27 years respectively.

Fireman's breath preserves toddler  
for teenage leukaemia.

Surf rescue saves body-boarder  
for serious middle-life psychosis.

Baby born on back seat  
to a long, slow death.

## Last night

she sat near

but not touching

as slow blood mottled

in your fingertips and

in the fringes

of your ears.

She said you

used to take her

to the picture show

years ago

and in the back row

in the white flicker

of forgotten scenes

on remembered screens

you would pare and slice

an apple

with your pocket knife

handing her

cool slivers

solemn as

gift-wrapped

chocolate.

## Fit for this

The hill is less steep this morning.  
Even the dog seems to feel it.  
Late acacia is freighted  
with heavy, graceful heads.

You've the look of new knowledge,  
wear the shoulders of someone older.  
Grey is green, the air is smell,  
Hardenbergia is where it hid.

I'd trade this fizzing spring  
for one proper, aching wind  
to alert the breath in your nostrils,  
remind you what winter really is.

## **Currawongs at minus 6**

Saline pushes like a small, cool tide up the arm to the elbow, where it is distinguishable no longer. The drug follows the same path, but stinging and slower. Outside, minus 6, but the furnace of infection is cosy. Currawongs exclaim, but only about the weather.

## Overboard

To be always within hearing  
of the gull's desolation,  
within reach of this sea  
of greasy basalt  
where the midnight sun  
spreads thinly portside  
and squid-ink impenetrable  
to starboard.

On the stern deck,  
from which he leaves  
in a swift and controlled vault,  
the ropes are coiled,  
like serpents wrestled  
and won  
earlier from the deep.

## Calendar

The early months of your death  
are booked up well in advance:

golf club lunches that won't be eaten,  
a birthday to be missed,

standing dates to be stood up:  
salon – dentist – specialist.

There are library books to be unread  
and a fridge festooned with lists

of errands, theatre visits,  
ideas for perfect Christmas gifts.

The pool man comes tomorrow,  
the gas bill on the 3rd.

The Sunday paper skips the lawn  
till stopped by the fishpond rocks –

we must remember to cancel it  
(and the milk, and the post-office box).

Now we're answering Christmas cards  
conveying your unwelcome news again.

Next year's calendar is propped by your phone,  
sealed in cellophane.

## Light

How then,  
when she was so light  
that enfolding her  
was cupping a brittle bird,

when her clothes swaddled her  
and her food was pecked  
and shifted about the plate,  
when even her eyes grew a lighter blue,

how then is her coffin so heavy  
at her dying  
that I struggle  
to hold my end of it?

## **A modern offer**

Dispensing  
for argument's sake  
with the whole  
harp-and-cloud version  
and putting aside  
squeamish concerns  
about corporeality  
and the passage of centuries

and confining ourselves  
to a more  
contemporary rendering,  
involving an ill-articulated  
celestial soup  
of remnant consciousness –  
a kind of  
resistless  
merging of essences,

why then  
is there not  
panic on the streets  
at the prospect  
of eternal life?

## **Rising of the Lights (London, 1665)**

Childbed. Teeth.

Stopping of the stomach.

French pox.

Frightened.

Smallpox. Flox. Grief.

Found dead in the street.

Bleeding.

Gripping in the guts.

Drowned

(one at Stepney,

one near the Tower,

one Westminster).

Imposthume.

Quinsie. Rickets.

Stranguary.

Head-mould-shot.

Surfeit.

Stone.

Kingsevil.

Timpany. Worms.

Rising of the Lights.

## The angry men's ward

Women die more neatly, as a rule – at the first stroke.

Men are higher maintenance:

the young dive into shallows or drive into posts.

The older encounter smaller obstacles –

tiny clots jamming brains, efflorescing bleeds.

They rage at the untidiness,

at the sturdy arms that roll and strap them

into contraptions of pretended mobility.

'I'm a master mariner,' they spit.

'I'm a professor of English Literature.

'I've dropped bombs, drawn a crowd,

built a sideboard, changed oil,

toileted without a guiding hand,

done without this cheery pity.

I've had women look at me not *at me*'.

**Lacrimae rerum**

**for Adeline**

The genitive engenders ambiguity.

Tears *of* things. A foetal moon, shielding its black, empty belly. A juddering forest, blossom sodden. A cascading howl of wolves, unheard for centuries, now shattering their silence upon your small head.

Tears *for* things: I take lament into my own hands, the sugar and fat of sentiment. Tears for you, *thing*. And for the vanished wolves, for Europe's lost forests, for the moon robbed of mystery.

Mostly for you, deemed too small for formal reception, certification. Though your fingernails were softly, perfectly formed, your eyes a real blue behind your sealed lids.

## **Curacurrang**

After several hours of walking, a place of hard red rock, where a trickle of tea-dark water composes itself in shallow handfuls before tilting toward the cliff. Back at Bundeena, 'missing-person' posters for a teenage son fray from telegraph poles and utility boxes. While I recover my breath, a stiff wind sheers up the rock-face to catch the fresh water as it tips over, lifts it back in particles, makes it mist, held aloft by physics, or wishing.

## Death bed

takes on new meaning here,  
where every bed is purposely designed  
and fit for the purpose.

Your mattress is made of pneumatic cells  
that sigh and bloat  
to vary the pressure on skin thinner  
than skin-thin.

You don't so much sink as float,  
remote, shape-shifting,  
an idea of restlessness.

You'll leave no impression  
of your own, but be exhaled  
with bed-mates unknown  
in thin streams of having been,  
the mattress quiet in between.

## **Contracture**

Her bass-clef hand is narrowing at the palm. Every few months another semitone is unreachable and she's hopping like ragtime to cover the loss. The surgeon gives her a leaflet, describes the zigzag incisions, says it means she has Viking blood, though she's never felt less red-headed. Back home she breathes in the blistered varnish, felted hammers with their faint, plosive dust, the acidulous brass of the pedals, the glottal silence.

Early on, they had spent a year in York, for his work. Tight with distaste and disappointment, she had paced the museum. Her memories are of bones – whistles, cracked from the legs of songbirds, and a wishbone bridge for a Viking lyre.

## Denomination

## Friedhof der Namenlosen

The Danube is not blue and does not dance  
but surges green with snow-melt  
toward Simmering where it flattens, slows  
and a meander lets go of the coarser silt,  
the storm-wrenched things:  
old barrel staves and bloated sheep,  
Vienna's murdered and its suicides.

Plant them where they've come ashore,  
in the black alluvial dirt,  
a cobbled communion of crucifixes  
each hung with a gilded Christ.  
Equality in him and anonymity.

*Speak your name, for you cannot be recognised.*

'No name, no name, even before the river took me,  
rolled me in the greenness of cold.  
My name was left on the last bridge,  
in the stones sewn into my pockets,  
the ligature about my throat.'

## Tintinnabulation

They say the time

How late the day

The time in the day

The wind in the hour

Of wind when it

Pushes down and in.

Clamorous, they

Speak in tongues

Of frailty, fealty

Tongues of coldest

Oldest bronze.

There's no not-hearing.

No deal can be struck.

The child is fled

The windflower plucked

The father dead.

Just as they say

Unspeakably.

## **Runne all out, as fast as may be**

Leave without leave  
and without really leaving.

Run out, as things running out  
that have no choice  
but clocking inevitability.

Run fast  
but slowly as fasting,  
slowly as quickening,  
quick as losing.

Fast as may be.

Quick now, all out.

## The pasts

Leaving Istanbul, the train idles for a signal change  
at a cutting of dense and cluttered reds and whites:  
conglomerates of shards, shells, trinkets, trash,  
each overbuilding the last.

Between me, in my stalled carriage,  
and Byzas, sent hither by the Oracle,  
just eighty generations, each flattened here  
in compactus with the past:  
triumphs, bloodings, frosts and chimneys,  
pelt of carpet, velvet of dog,  
bones and broken teeth and tiles.

From the dirty lap of the Bosphorus  
the generations rise  
in one heaving midden-mound  
to the haggling market of the present present,  
more trinkets and trash in the making.

Eighty lifetimes, close enough for an amphora  
to smell of the wine it held,  
for a bone to resurrect a festive meal  
or a cause of unnatural death.  
Above the cutting, already sunk to the ankles,  
a wall, horny and scalloped as a tortoise shell,  
is punctured every three metres by air-con units,  
glittering like revealed tesserae.

## Conjugal headstones

Doubly wretched  
a shared grave unshared:  
stone sculpted in expectation,  
a ditch double-depth dug.  
A splayed page engraved,  
but one side forever undated –  
a century's lichen can't obscure:  
this bed's half-empty, un-mated.  
It speaks unwonted happy endings,  
re-marriage, removal, release  
for she who held a ripening hand,  
looked into a cooling eye,  
swore she'd go to the lip of dark  
and join him by and by.

## **A long time**

Eternity is a long time for anything:

to be in love without outwearing welcome,

to be dreamless without hope of dreaming,

to remain interested.

To do without the escape of exhaustion,

or the small deceit of pretended sleep.

## **Wish you were here**

Houses hold fast through habitation:  
walls will stand while there's breath within,  
but chaos has an instinct for an opening.

Vandals, moulds, are agents of entropy,  
silence is a start – enough to crack the windows,  
and alert the termite ants.

Week one: dust flocculates,  
a stripped mattress jangles with sudden springs.  
The violin lets itself go by half-tones.

Your things are becoming just things.

## J. M. Barrie's boys (in the Everest death zone)

This air is thin as gruel.  
One after another they taste it –  
the faint, oatmeal slipperiness,  
the cold that shocks the pink of the lung.

This one, his boots acid yellow as a builder's vest  
palms prayed around an absent coffee,  
head could be dozing, wind fingering  
the fur of his hood, like breath.

Another, there, has toppled  
into eternal youth, hip-splayed  
the width of a double bed  
in eddies of duckdown,

head proffered in profoundest sleep,  
snow packing his parted lips.

*Tupac, Norbu, Mallory, Irvine*  
*Wilson, Wang, Breitenbach.*  
*By avalanche, haemorrhage, exhaustion,*  
*fall.*

The inessential is lost first:  
digestion, love, logic,  
chunks of Milton, periodic tables,  
a best dog's name.

Next lost are the extremities:  
will, anger, a wife's face.  
Life's companions fall away  
like beads from a snapped string.

*Lobsang and Tasker, Lhakpa, Pasang,  
by perishing wind and swollen brain,  
crevasse and ice-fall.  
Eyes open to the passing years,  
cheeks cryonically palled.*

Some are now become way-markers:  
'bear right at red jacket,  
right again at the ice cave'  
into which one crept  
flag stitched to his breast,

to realise he was solid to the calves,  
to catch and lose his breath.  
No telling from the faces  
how shrunken necessity feels.

## **The garden before what happened in it**

The roses blew redder.  
There were more birds then.  
No seasons, but abundance  
year-round.

The fish faced no predator,  
permitted the sun  
to flash its swift flanks  
like a wound.

Perfection was sedative  
but curiosity wormed in.  
The resting tyrant woke  
at the sound.

## The Ly-ee-Moon Cemetery, Green Cape, NSW

The clearing is hemmed solid with twisting banksia  
and a coming tempest's thickened air.

They hauled the bodies here  
brined and laundered  
to be always within hearing  
of the thing that killed them:  
the concussion of water and rock.

Green Cape Light sweeps a clockwork eye  
but quick, quick, quick.  
It is not a searchlight,  
cannot fix upon a point,  
upon one figure torn away  
one trapped by the shoulders in smothering foam,  
another snatched from rescue's arms  
and given up to rock.

Some are named here, others not.  
For each, one simple, whitewashed rock:  
the cook's friend;  
a woman, unaccompanied;  
the man with the German accent.  
Their psalm is the seasonal cicada,  
the susurration of small birds,  
the booming bell of water-beaten rock.

Over the century, sand has shifted.  
Finger bones have reached for finger bones,  
pelvises tilted, craniums touched.

## **Ave atque vale**

This is where I must name you  
for a last time to your face,  
summon you from whatever brink  
then put my finger to your still chest,  
push  
and watch you sink.

## **By request**

No Calla lilies whitely fleshly  
hours from pooling, darkening at the edges  
or masking violets massed and corrupting sweetly.  
Nothing with eyes that stare brightly  
or button-like or deep jet-lashed or dewy.  
Nothing nodding, nothing proud,  
no thorns so no roses.  
No garden sprays careless with infinite care  
or lavender like clothes packed away.  
No primrose, for there'll be no spring.  
Bring no white chrysanthemums.  
Perhaps poppies, kind oblivion.

## **Nameless**

This is not farewell for the nameless dead,  
for the slip of cells that slides away too early,  
the unknown soldier whose flame is kept  
and who cannot be put to bed.

This is not farewell for the river dead,  
dredged from the Ganges,  
for bones surfacing from a shallow grave,  
for those swept from decks  
by a lightless storm  
to wash in the welter  
or be patted down unmarked  
above the tide.

How may we be consigned without a name?

Down sewers, in trenches, over bridges,  
done away, or done for, or friendless,  
how may we be reconciled?

## Phoenix

Here is the instinctiveness of the old salmon, heaving upstream to spawn, flesh already turning mush, burrowing magnetically through the ripping, flaying water.

Here is the self-knowledge of the ageing, drowsy queen, signing her own black warrant, squatting out virgin rivals even as the murmurous workers cluster for the regicide.

He assembles fragrant, volatile twigs of cinnamon. His scaly neck snakes this way and that, his old eyes roll with knowledge of what is to come. From his beak drip flames, low and cool, that suddenly take.

## Brooch

Would I want a brooch  
of your human hair  
if that was all I had of you?

Send me the brooch  
with the plait tight-woven of silver-grey  
smoothed with your sweat.

Would I want a diamond  
pressed of your carbon  
if a ring was all that remained of us?

The diamond would shine clean white  
inside the greasy plait tight-woven.  
Send it to me.

Would I want your leg-bone,  
the long one of your lean and silky-haired thigh  
to poke my embers into heat?

Poke, poke, shed light  
on all the glittering facets  
inside the greasy plait.

Would I keep you from the ground  
or from the flames  
to keep from losing you forever?

Undig the darkening earth.  
Extinguish the heat.  
Let us lie, cool, on the surface of things.

## **Ash, dust**

Again, beloved, sum a human worth  
in these two dates: Death and Birth.  
Graven in stone or memorial wall  
each man's measure  
measured in things  
common to all.

*Un*mention all that is tenuous –  
the sudden and unbidden glimpse:  
opera of erupting calyx,  
the wrestle in a gaping gill,  
jasmine through a night-propped sill,  
blue pulse in a turning wrist.

The moments most devoutly sought,  
and most reluctantly unheld,  
the things most meant, the things most fated,  
here lie spent, undated.

## Write you

To remember your laugh  
I walk out into a shrilling dawn  
where currawongs soul-whistle  
as they swoon from trees  
and the dog breathes complexities  
from a blade of grass.

To recall your eyes I find  
any cracked old leather chair and sit  
till my heart slows  
to the thick knock of seconds  
at the case of your mantel clock.

To hear your breath  
I need a winter wind  
finding ways around  
summer's muscled obstacles,  
startling skin to rise  
and moaning of the great effort of life.

## **I went today**

again down to where  
willows trawl the dark water  
and moorhens startle every time  
as if for the first time  
from the cold, clattering rushes.  
Went down seeking  
not the willows' deep-reaching,  
but forgetfulness, like birds.

## Seventeen

I say, how can you lie  
so many hours in a row,  
not even pursuing the sun  
as it runs across the boards?  
Your fur forms small, hard mats  
where your dry tongue cannot reach.  
I wring a cloth in hot water,  
smooth away the loose hairs,  
the uric smell.  
You arch and purr,  
eyes tight as a sightless kitten.

## **Fixity**

Algorithms insist that this image on my screen has not altered by one pixel, that the burn of your cheek is as fresh, the bleed of sweat on your mare's flank is as dark, her eye as rolling. I'm almost out of the frame, one sandaled ankle in a stirrup. The stirrup is the stirrup it was, exactly. Your hair, I see now, is more halo than afro, but afro or halo enough for a white girl with thin, red arms, hauling in a sweating mare with rolling eyes unaltered, though the horse must have been for the knackery these 40 years, or tracted into a pit on the bottom paddock.

## Case

In the bag of effects  
are your cold dentures, clicked away  
in a jaw-shaped case.

Click.

They smell  
of breathing out,  
of the soft opening of an armpit  
at the last  
to reach for the cool,

of the *pah*      *pah*  
of puffed, sleeping breath.

## **There's nothing to be frightened of**

In this sheltered bay  
where the tide insinuates without show,  
water lays its hands upon the sand,  
rolls small shells between its fingers  
and drops them. Twice daily  
this touching,  
        even today  
when the world, oddly, is not arrested  
by your absence,  
when the tides neither boil nor lie meek,  
when the planet heaves itself  
in its rut regardless.  
The water lays gentle hands on the sand,  
dandles, idly, a carapace; lets go.

## Poetry

All poetry is about death.

Love songs too,

and ditties for children.

All acts of creation and curiosity  
have a sub-text of extinction.

All sex is about death –  
deathly bad sex especially  
but good sex too.

Poems *about* sex are killers.

## **Timor mortis conturbat me**

Faith is most faint  
in this hour before dawn.  
A sigh might extinguish it.

On the wards it's the death-watch,  
the deep ebb.  
The cooling perfume of breath  
settles like a gauze.

Let me die just so,  
in faithlessness and fear,  
fully alive  
to what's being lost,  
not dreamless as a baby  
or taken unawares.

## Roland Barthes' mother in the Winter Garden, and other photographs

At Chennevières-sur-Marne, aged five. Acute elbows, a calyx of white collaring her throat, one finger hooked in the other fist. Buckled shoes a burr of just-stopped scuffing. Hair a spiky, sepia twist. Mildly round-eyed as though someone has just made an offer, in return for attention. This is what Barthes finds among his mother's things. The details, I confect.

*Napoleon's brother, Jerome, in 1852. Well-fed, sleeked hair and a top hat tilted on a white thumb. Exhausted about the mouth, the look of one who has just exhaled. No need for confection – this image exists. Google it. Barthes' one thought: 'I look, in this image, into eyes that looked into the eyes of the Emperor'. He is astonished, mentions it at evening parties, with intensity. People remember that they were just on their way to get a drink.*

The Winter Garden has tropic palms, glass refractions that bewitch shutter timings and a smell of quick and wet decay. There's a sweating ornamental bridge in the background; in the foreground, near Barthes' mother's five-year-old cheek, a smudge that may be something dark on the wing, or an artefact of the darkroom. What will be lost when this is all gone into the bin or the fire when Barthes dies? Not the smudge. I imagined it.

*Lewis Payne, failed political assassin, 1865. Lurched against a plate-metal wall, he could be a propped post-mortem portrait for the papers, but this happens to be pre. He is angelic, in looks. Cleft chin. His hands are a pianist's. His shirt strikes the eye like a swipe of velvet. Barthes: 'I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake'. Both 'this will be' and 'this has been'.*

There's an older brother, aged seven, arm extended along the rail of the ornamental bridge. He's turned away, swiftly, so his chin has the sheered look of a landed uppercut. She, Barthes' mother, aged five, has not noticed, attention fixed *mostly* on whoever's behind the lens, talking, and *a little* on her right stocking, which is relaxing into white

ruches below her knee. Barthes shows us every photo but this one: the Winter Garden, the gasping palms, the bright glass canopy. The point is, she is going to die. It inheres in every photo, this catastrophe.

## Remember cold

Remember *this* cold. The grind of it in the shoulder.  
On Mount Townsend with a white dawn wind picking at the tent.

Remember the collapse of raspberry against tongue,  
the foraged, hot hedgerow with the hard,  
scrappy glitter of the North Sea,  
and a day racing thunderheads.

Remember the look of people and loves  
and the places they were. Embroider them  
so they stick when ripped.

Remember the slipped knife on a thumb,  
the quick bulge of startled blood,  
the white scar, years later,  
the thin, nagging line.

## **You will miss**

Sky erupting storm clouds  
like oily smoke  
and the koel crying,  
crying.

Slow-cooling tea  
in shells of pink china.

Music without  
its words.

The movement of time,  
the presence of mass,  
an awareness of the speed.

## **Sky burial**

She will be bird-scattered. In gentleness, body-breakers will feel for where the joints are resistless. Where there's no wood for wasting or soil for concealment, death becomes an act of generosity, fealty to quick seasons, sudden-wilting meadows. Rock, rock. Pelting, rainless clouds. This land needs all the death it can get. Vultures spiral into unstoppable decline. Parents of dead infants sometimes quail, instead set sail tiny boats with light burdens into the runs of milky ice-melt, where fishes feed.

## **Die like a dog**

Dog does not die,  
is merely there, then not –  
depthless eye shallowed,  
become loveless,  
tongue loosed.

Death's dominion  
depends on attention.  
He gave it none –

neither this one  
nor the small death  
attendant on each  
moment

walk  
ball  
bush  
bone

## Marigold

The ghat is kept for the highest caste, but they lave her in the river as though she needs cleansing. Nearby, a child bobs and sinks in the lumber and fatty swirls, then emerges, sleek, unclean as a river thing, to squat and watch.

White as a faintness, limbs restlessly anyhow, mouth keeps opening but eyebrows quite concentrated. White without light. Old, or looking old, now.

The wood is laid about in intricate structures, a perfect lie. The mound of garlands is teased apart and strung. The oldest son sets the flame. For a long while, the fire and the marigolds are the same.

## Things I've thought to tell you since I saw you last

How the first sun of summer is  
a red hand on my shoulder.

How cheese can be:  
shattered, corrupted,  
or bulging from its skin.

That I thought I saw you looking  
from my dog's liquid eye.

How, after all, it was only my dog,  
bone-lust and loyalty  
in dangerous, delicate balance.

## One year and nine months

One year and nine months and he has not stopped moving – places you were together, and ones intended. In his pocket, zip-lock bags of you, small rubble, gritty dust, uncompromising, as in life. You have been snatched by the wind at Machu Picchu, furtively dumped at Gracelands, have accreted the fields of Civil War dead and fallen noiseless and twisting from the cliffs at Royal. Today, you anoint Karl Marx's grave at Highgate (also, the bust of Bruce Reynolds, mastermind of the Great Train Robbery, but not the cool, shadowed plinth of George Eliot). The historian in you would be tickled, I think. Resting on a bench crocheted with lichen, by the plain stone of Sidney Nolan, he says, *you should really talk about this stuff. We didn't*. Next week he takes you to Auschwitz.

## **The wonders I have seen at daybreak**

A kitten on the doorstep in frosted ginger fur,  
drawn here by the cat-shaped hole in this house.

A baby, gaping first breath like a goldfish  
as gold light spills on a lino floor.

A dolphin skull cast up on cold sand,  
its peg teeth amber as wooden plugs.

Your hospital window, the only one yellow lit  
as we arrive to answer the call.

## The inverted gaze

Is it a trick of composition  
or of light  
that you catch and hold my eye  
from your hallway frame?

I recall that sitting:  
a last corralling  
of our generations.

In seven days you would be dead  
and look not at all  
like yourself.

Tonight, your eyes catch  
at those of the living,  
anxious to tell something,  
or curious,  
or just communing,  
or none of these things,  
simply lost in thought  
or simply lost.

You gaze still,  
looking longest,  
long after I've looked away.