

Becoming Warm: Matrimony and Reticence in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas

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The Welsh poet R. S. Thomas married twice. His first wife was the English painter Elsi Eldridge, and their marriage was a long one, lasting from 1940 until her death in 1991. In 1996 the poet met and married his second wife, Betty Vernon: they were ‘two octogenarians trying to ignore the fact’, as he wrote to Raymond Garlick.¹ But it is the first and longer relationship – not least after it had ended and had been reduced to memory – that was the inspiration behind some of the most complex and unfairly neglected love poems written in English in the twentieth century. Thomas is commonly regarded as a poet with two central themes: the condition of Wales and the presence or absence of God. But he is also, on rare occasions, a startlingly original, austere *and* tender poet of matrimonial love.

Poems about marriage are not necessarily love poems, of course. It would be something of a stretch to use this term to refer to most of Thomas’s poems on the subject written before Elsi’s death. The first mention of his marriage in Thomas’s poetry is in ‘Ap Huw’s Testament’, from *Poetry for Supper* (1958), published eighteen years after their wedding.² The poem is not dissimilar in tone to Philip Larkin’s ‘Talking in Bed’, with its depressed yet forthright implication that a long-term relationship creates a sort of hermetic seal at a ‘unique distance from isolation’, keeping out the wider world of people and possibilities.³ In Thomas’s poem, Elsi is listed, with the pragmatism of an inventory, as first among the four people in his life:

Let me begin
With her of the immaculate brow
My wife; she loves me. I know how.

But the reader does not ‘know how’ – and nor, the tone of the poem implies, should he: the poet will not and perhaps cannot express it. As Justin Wintle has commented, the reader is ‘invited into the poet’s hallway, but is told he can advance no further than the foot of the staircase’.⁴ Certainly, though, Thomas does not seem particularly *pleased*, or otherwise

¹ R. S. Thomas, *Letters to Raymond Garlick: 1951 – 1999*, ed. by Jason Walford Davies (Llandysul: Gomer, 2009), p. 153.

² R. S. Thomas, *Collected Poems: 1945 – 1990* (London: Phoenix, 1993), p. 83.

³ Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber / Marvell, 1988), p. 129.

⁴ Justin Wintle, *Furious Interiors: Wales, R. S. Thomas and God* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 142.

moved, by his matrimonial bond. It is simply a fact, albeit one he is moved to acknowledge as significant.

Thomas's first poem specifically and explicitly about his marriage is 'Anniversary', written in 1959 and published in *Tares* two years later.⁵ The poem has the dour refrain 'Nineteen years now' for the first line of each of its three eight-line stanzas. But for all its cool solemnity, and perhaps even because of it, this is at heart a commemorative poem, celebrating a relationship that had become central to the poet's sense of self. Far narrower in scope than 'Ap Huw's Testament', it concentrates on matrimonial belonging as a day-to-day reality, and does so without recourse to any of the standard tropes of romance:

Nineteen years now
Under the same roof
Eating our bread,
Using the same air;
Sighing, if one sighs,
Meeting the other's
Words with a look
That thaws suspicion.

Being 'Under the same roof' does not necessarily indicate intimacy, of course – and in a sense Thomas and Elsi were not particularly intimate. About sixteen years after the publication of 'Anniversary', when the poet retired from his job as a priest, the couple moved to an isolated one-floor house at Rhiw on the Llŷn Peninsula, fulfilling a shared dream of 'breaking away, and going to live in a cottage, "on water and crust"'.⁶ However, they took to living in separate ends, either side of a partitioning wall, with the result that to see one another it was necessary first to go outside. Even at Eglwysfach Vicarage, where 'Anniversary' was written, the couple spent most of their time in different parts of a large house, sharing a kitchen but not much else.⁷ Still, the poem emphasises their time together at this kitchen table, where they share bread – a sustenance food, but one that calls to mind the biblical breaking of bread, and the comforts of companionship and support inherent in a sacramental ritual. Looking at one another 'thaws suspicion'; why there should be suspicion in the first place is not so much as intimated, as though such feelings are innately human, but its existence and abatement is, crucially, shared.

The poet's biographer Byron Rogers notes that 'Their marriage fascinated the very

⁵ Thomas, *Collected Poems*, p. 103.

⁶ R. S. Thomas, 'Autobiographical Essay', in *Miraculous Simplicity: Essays on R.S. Thomas*, ed. by William V. Davis (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), p. 6.

⁷ Byron Rogers, *The Man Who Went Into the West: The Life of R. S. Thomas* (London: Aurum, 2006), p. 234.

few who got close enough to see it', before quoting John Mowat, who knew the Thomases: 'You were very conscious, not of estrangement, but of separateness'.⁸ This crucial distinction is reflected in 'Anniversary': there is no sense of estrangement – quite the opposite, in fact. The couple have a temperamental affinity, and 'affection' in the poem inheres in the fact that the speaker shares his austere life with his wife. This is a far cry from the dystopian alternative to solitude-in-matrimony reductively portrayed by Larkin in that most direct of all anti-marriage poems, 'Self's the Man':

And when he finishes supper
Planning to have a read at the evening paper
It's *Put a screw in this wall*—
He has no time at all [...].⁹

The 'he' of this poem has 'no time' because he has to shoulder the burden of someone else's needs. And this is a thankless task, epitomised by the crude Freudian displacement in the third line. In Thomas's 'Anniversary', however, mutual respect for the sanctity of the individual is an essential ingredient of marriage, and a reason for its 'nineteen years'.

Thomas's earliest poetry about his marriage, then, is gaunt in tone but touching for its honesty: both partners can be taciturn and distant, but their relationship is one based on shared (if stunted) emotions and is set to endure because both feel a powerful sense of belonging. Nonetheless, this emotional tepidity brings in its wake a slew of missed opportunities. A much later anniversary poem, 'Golden Wedding', written not long before Elsi's final illness, takes this combination of emotional nourishment and coldness to even greater extremes, because of the time-scale the poem encompasses:

Gradually
over fifty long years
of held breath
the heart has become warm.¹⁰

There is an ambiguity inherent in Thomas's use of the phrase 'held breath'. The implication could be that they fail to communicate and that 'the heart has become warm' in spite of this; or it may have 'become warm' because they have both learned to hold their tongues when in one another's company; or the speaker may have warmed to his wife because they have a powerful if unspoken mutual understanding; or the 'held breath' might be his alone and only

⁸ Rogers, p. 221.

⁹ Larkin, p. 117.

¹⁰ R. S. Thomas, *Collected Later Poems: 1988 – 2000* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe, 2004), p. 328.

at this ripe stage in their relationship is he able to release it, to open up. None of these meanings can take precedence, implying a composite of all four. But the singular and formerly cold ‘heart’ can only belong to the poet, and that it has finally ‘become warm’ after all these years is an implicit admittance that it should have done so much earlier.

Perhaps the warmest love poem written about Elsi during her lifetime is ‘The Way of It’, the title poem of Thomas’s 1977 collection. It is a work of praise more than affection, in which the speaker’s wife is presented directly as selfless and devoted, holding the strings of their marriage together:

She is at work
always, mending the garment
of our marriage, foraging
like a bird for something
for us to eat. If there are thorns
in my life, it is she who
will press her breast to them and sing.¹¹

He once attempted to ‘deceive’ her with his vivacity and posturing, spreading ‘the panoply / of [his] feathers instinctively / to engage her’; she saw through the display and ‘accepted’ him for what he was. As in ‘Golden Wedding’, Thomas does not allow himself to come across particularly well in this poem. By implication, he *damages* the ‘garment’ of their marriage so that she must ‘mend’ it if it is to be preserved. Fflur Dafydd claims Thomas often creates parables or analogies by comparing women to birds, and states that ‘many of his female subjects [are] viewed as delicate, fragile creatures’.¹² However, the subject of this poem is anything but fragile and delicate. Rather, she is strong enough to single-handedly keep their lives in order, and chivalrous enough to take on the speaker’s pain as though it is her own.

As J. P. Ward notes, the poem ‘comes as near to [...] affection as [Thomas] is likely to allow himself’ – at least at the time.¹³ Fully accepting as it does the poet’s great debt to his wife, ‘The Way of It’ is in every sense a poem of love and praise, not least because of the caveat that is impossible to ignore: were the speaker’s wife more like the speaker, their marriage would not be a mended ‘garment’, something that fits them both snugly, but would instead wear out through neglect. He and his wife maintain the separateness and lightness of ‘free’ birds, but the burden of holding that separateness at a workable distance falls on the subject, not the speaker, and they both know it.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 323.

¹² Fflur Dafydd, “‘There were fathoms in her too’: R.S. Thomas and Women”, in *Renascence*, 60: 2 (January 2008), 117-130, (p. 120).

The poems of Thomas's discussed thus far do not speak of a man unable to love, or unsatisfied by marriage. Rather, they suggest that their author is acutely aware of his temperamental inability to give enough of himself to his partner. It would be natural, perhaps, to conclude from the bulk of Thomas's poems on the subject that their marriage was less than it might have been – though the evidence suggests they suited one another very well, and that Elsi could be almost as distant as her husband. For example, at Christmas 1986 Elsi wrote to her niece: 'We were feeling particularly alone – from choice. I adore being alone, and Ronald adores being alone, so we decided to be alone together, but felt a bit guilty at being so indulgent'.¹⁴ This is a special kind of simultaneous isolation and togetherness, in which there could be no participants other than Elsi and Ronald Thomas. However, within five years of writing this, Elsi had passed away. After fifty-one years of this mutual regard for solitude, of living 'Under the same roof' and 'Gradually [...] becom[ing] warm', being alone *alone* inspired in Thomas a flurry of sad, moving love poems concerned with conditions of presence and absence. Too late to do anything about it, he seems to have felt compelled to attempt some artistic recompense for the 'held breath' and often-cool heart about which he had written in 'Golden Wedding' the year before his wife's death. Indeed, Tony Brown hardly overstates the point when he suggests that 'as a tribute to a lost wife, these poems form a sequence unequalled since Hardy's 1912-13 poems to his first wife'.¹⁵

'No Time', published in *No Truce with the Furies* (1995), is one of Thomas's most tender elegies, and it harks back to 'The Way of It'. The speaker is still studious and contemplative, wallowing in solitude; his wife has died, transcended, and momentarily signals to him, or seems to:

she comes
to me still, as she would
do, and I at my reading.
There is a tremor
of light, as of a bird crossing
the sun's path, and I look
up in recognition
of a presence in an absence.¹⁶

The 'do' hangs obtrusively, touchingly highlighting the fact that the subject of the poem is now, and permanently, unable to 'do' anything, at least in life (an incapacity reflected in the

¹³ J. P. Ward, *The Poetry of R.S. Thomas* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1987), p. 137.

¹⁴ Rogers, p. 268.

¹⁵ Tony Brown, *R. S. Thomas* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), p. 105.

¹⁶ Thomas, *Collected Later Poems*, p. 237.

hard reality of the poem's title). But as in 'The Way of It' the absent wife is reminiscent of a bird, with all the connotations of freedom and separateness that go along with that in the earlier poem.

'Together', written close to the end of Thomas's life and included (along with 'Golden Wedding') in the posthumously published collection *Residues* (2002), begins: 'All my life / I was face to face / with her'.¹⁷ When Thomas wrote this poem he had already married his second wife, but Betty makes little impact on the poems written during their time together; all the romantic energy in his work, even at this stage, goes into fulfilling his emotional duties to his first wife. 'All my life' is not literal truth, of course: for the first twenty-five years of Thomas's life he did not know Elsi at all, and he wrote whilst living without her once more – or at least without her physical presence. But he is too careful a poet to make a clumsy slip, and the only conclusion left to draw is that by writing 'All my life' he is suggesting that Elsi effectively *became* his life, or even that his life 'started' and possibly even 'ended' with her.

In this poem Thomas, the lover of solitude, paints his first wife as one even more attuned to the virtues of glorious isolation, and remembers himself as a love-drunk figure staring after her in wonder (even if he did not put too much effort into following her):

There was a room
 Apart she kept herself in,
 Teasing me by leading me
 To its glass door, only
 To confront me with
 My reflection.

This is a poem rich in memories, and provides an insight into an unusually lonely – and yet fulfilling – married life. In spite of all the time they spent apart during their marriage, the poem delights in recalling their mutual understanding:

Coming in from the fields
 With my offerings of flowers
 I found her garden
 Had forestalled me in providing
 Civilities for my desk.

This is not coincidence so much as a sign of mutual understanding and belonging, a blossoming in itself and one less ephemeral than any flowers. But theirs is not an eternal

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

belonging: they remain together only in memory, in reimagining, in the poem and its title. Moreover, the wry formality of the language in the above lines, in particular the final two, is at odds with the tenderness of the anecdote and hints at the way they might at the time have reservedly reacted to such touching moments of mutual understanding. She was not only ‘providing / Civilities’, but also showing love – and Thomas’s use of awkwardly formal language in this part of the poem hints that he knows he would have missed out by not reacting to it in those terms when he had the chance. As Thomas’s life went on, then, the impetus behind his love poems developed from acknowledgment and commemoration to apology and elegy.

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