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**'[A] shifting/identity never your own' : the uncanny and unhomely in the poetry of R.S. Thomas**

Dafydd, Fflur

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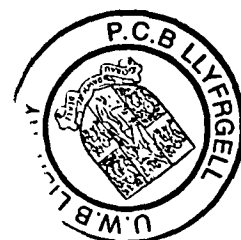
“[A] shifting / identity never your own”: the uncanny and the unhomely in the writing of R.S. Thomas

by Fflur Dafydd

In fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in The University of Wales

English Department  
University of Wales, Bangor  
2004

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## **Abstract**

### **“[A] shifting / identity never your own:” The uncanny and the unhomely in the writing of R.S. Thomas.**

The main aim of this thesis is to consider R.S. Thomas's struggle with identity during the early years of his career, primarily from birth up until his move to the parish of Aberdaron in 1967. It is an analysis both of the poet's personal life and his public, national role as a poet, examining the tensions present between his numerous, conflicting identities.

The discussion is separated into three main chapters. The introductory passage takes into consideration the various ways R.S. Thomas is constructed by his critics and by the media, concentrating in particular on the varying responses to his death in 2000. Chapter 1 then moves on to discuss notions of the uncanny, as proposed by Sigmund Freud and the critic Nicholas Royle, as a means of exploring Thomas's feelings of alienation and displacement throughout childhood and early adult life.

Chapter 2 is a comparative study of R.S. Thomas and the Scots vernacular poet Hugh MacDiarmid, which looks at how MacDiarmid provides for Thomas a model of Celtic regeneration, enabling Thomas to relocate himself in a cultural context, and also to explore the cultural and linguistic tensions he feels within Wales, as an English-language poet.

Chapter 3 then attempts to relate the uncanny to issues of post-colonial theory, using the work of Homi K. Bhabha and David Punter as a means of providing a more theoretical basis in the form of the unhomely, and to show how Thomas's political poetry presents Wales as a terrifying, and often unreal territory within which the poet evidently felt both disorientated and displaced.

This study concludes by considering various notions of personal, cultural and spiritual unity as they are presented in Thomas's work, and how ultimately, Thomas struggled to counteract the alienating forces of the uncanny and the unhomely, and to strive for a spiritual unity within himself.

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I present this thesis in memory of Rachel Myra Jones, my grandmother.

## Abbreviations

### (i) *Poetry*

- AL *An Acre of Land* (Newtown: Montgomeryshire Printing Co., 1952).
- BT *The Bread of Truth* (London: Hart-Davis, 1963).
- CP *Collected Poems: 1945-1990* (London: J.M. Dent 1993).
- ERS *The Echoes Return Slow* (London: Macmillan, 1988).
- SF *The Stones of the Field* (Carmarthen: Druid Press, 1946).
- SP *Selected Poems: 1946-1968* (London: Hart-Davis, 1973).
- SYT *Song at the Year's Turning* (London: Hart-Davis, 1955).
- T *Tares* (London: Hart-Davis, 1961).
- WA *Welsh Airs* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1987).
- WW? *What is a Welshman?* (Llandybie: Christopher Davies, 1974).

### (ii) *Prose*

- A *R.S. Thomas: Autobiographies*, ed. and trans. Jason Walford Davies (London: J.M. Dent, 1997).
- CorW? *Cymru or Wales?* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1992).
- SLPR *Selected Prose*, ed. Sandra Anstey (3<sup>rd</sup> edn; Bridgend: Seren, 1995).
- WPT *Wales: A Problem of Translation* (London: Adam Archive Publications, 1996).
- PMI *Pe Medrwn yr Iaith* eds. Tony Brown and Bedwyr Lewis Jones (Llandybie: Christopher Davies, 1988).

## Introduction: Constructing R.S. Thomas

What would R.S. Thomas, lover of simple Celtic churches, have made of the celebration of his life and poetry which took place in the full grandeur of Westminster Abbey on March 28?<sup>1</sup>

In an article in the *New Welsh Review* in the Summer of 2001, Barbara Prys-Williams questioned the authenticity and appropriateness of R.S. Thomas's commemorative service in Westminster Abbey. What would R.S. Thomas, a self-identified republican and Welsh nationalist, have made of an event situated at the very heart of imperial, monarchical England? The question seemed dense with a Thomas-like complexity, reminiscent of several other unanswered questions addressed by Thomas's poetry "without hope / of a reply" (CP, 361). And yet, there were some answers to be found. After all, the event seemed carefully to take into account the new, post-colonial model of devolution, inviting a representative 'voice' from each nation to pay their dues to the poet, a responsibility shared between the Welsh poet Gillian Clarke, the Scottish poet John Burnside, and the Irish poet Seamus Heaney. But its tenuousness as a commemorative event was only partially masked by this post-colonial compromise. Nothing disguised the fact that the event was organised by the Poet Laureate – an appointment of the English crown, of course – and that R.S. Thomas's memory was celebrated in the capital city of England, through the medium of the English language and under the roof of an English institution. And it is little wonder, perhaps, that Barbara

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Prys-Williams, "Chapter and Verse: Poets defy the elements and the machine to celebrate R.S.'s life and work," *New Welsh Review* 52 (Summer 2001): 99

Prys-Williams feels it appropriate to record the significance of the weather at the end of the day, suggesting R.S. Thomas's likely response: "We left in a thunderstorm."<sup>2</sup>

One of the main problems concerning Thomas seems to be that of definition: both externally, within the public realm, and internally, on a more personal level. The many contradictory aspects of his complex character made the definition of a singular, unified R.S. Thomas near impossible. When one turns to the work itself, one finds that the images of self and of the "demolition / of the identity" (CP, 329) vacillate consistently between complex distortions of reflection and deconstruction. He seemed plagued by the impossibility of secure identity, pondering both the "shifting / identity never your own"<sup>3</sup> and the "dismantling / by the self of a self it / could not reassemble" (CP, 329).

If anything could have served as a kind of resolution to his complex character, one would suppose that it would be his death. In later life, Thomas himself had toyed with the idea of resolving his many inconsistencies – most of which were of a cultural kind. Although a fierce advocate of the Welsh language and culture, he published the main bulk of his poetry in London, and it perhaps remains a mystery why he chose to accept the Queen's medal for poetry, and to send his son to an English boarding school. And yet such contradictions were, in one sense, the very essence of Thomas's personae, public *and* private. In his much quoted poem "Epitaph," for example, he urges that "The poem in the rock and / the poem in the mind / Are not one / It was in dying / I tried to make them so" (CP, 216). This suggests a desire for the unity not only of the personal and public self, but also of the poetic persona.

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<sup>2</sup> Prys-Williams 99.

<sup>3</sup> R.S. Thomas, No Truce with the Furies (Newcastle-upon-tyne: Bloodaxe, 1995) 31.



In the aftermath of R.S. Thomas's death, his public persona proved almost crucial in constructing an identity for the poet. But rather than achieving its desired, resolute purpose, his death merely served to diversify Thomas even further, making him, as he had been in his life, the focal point of cultural politics and national identification. The many divides within his personal life became magnified and projected, especially when that life was taken into consideration by the English and the Welsh press. Both strove to contain him within their own cultural reality, and both, in a sense, were entitled to do so. And yet, the notion of *actualising* Thomas within two, entirely separate linguistic spheres carried with it numerous implications.

In order to analyse the reaction given by the *Western Mail*, it is perhaps first appropriate to consider the cultural shifts undergone by this publication over recent years. Here is a 'national' newspaper, based in the cosmopolitan core of an essentially British-identified capital city, a paper previously dubbed "Llais y Sais" (The voice of the Englishman) for its lack of Welsh-language material, and its hostile attitude towards Welsh nationalism and its aspirations. But, as post-devolutionary society attempts to define itself more clearly, the cultural and indeed the *linguistic*, focus of the publication has gradually changed. In order to set itself aside from other British publications, and in order to reflect the political changes within the ideology of nationality, the *Western Mail* now includes more Welsh-language material than ever before. It is perhaps, therefore, not surprising that R.S. Thomas's death is recorded with an ardency that is slightly at odds with the news coverage of previous years. His death was recorded prominently on the front page, with inside features claiming that he was "a poet we should be proud of,"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Westgate column," *Western Mail* (September 29, 2000) 4.

stressing a notion of Wales as “we,” incorporating Thomas as part of the collective. The irony here lay in the fact that Thomas himself did not believe in this kind of unity, and in fact, would have argued that the majority of the *Western Mail's* readers, being English-speaking, were not Welsh at all. Further irony sprang from the fact that he had previously been viewed by the *Western Mail* as a rather ambiguous figure, refusing, for example, to condemn the burning of second homes in Wales, an approach many people considered to be an act of terrorism. And yet he had now been elevated to the status of a national hero.

Mario Basini writes:

By many he was loved as a father is loved, a man whose courage and uncompromising commitment to the ‘family’ of Welsh speaking Wales promised shelter from the storms whipped up by a hostile twentieth century.<sup>5</sup>

The exalted tone and registers used here again seem slightly at odds with Thomas’s reality as a man and as a poet, and certainly omit the fact of his notoriously reclusive nature, and the fact that Thomas’s ‘courage’ and ‘commitment’ was often seen most prominently in a local context, such as his involvement with, and dedication to, groups like Cyfeillion Llŷn. Basini continues with the metaphor of leadership and goes on to describe him as “a saintly leader of the nation who by personal sacrifice and force of personality breathed life into a dying culture.”<sup>6</sup> This again fails to take into account the idea that his radical, political stance often left him bereft of clear ‘leadership’ power even within Welsh-speaking Wales and perhaps never more so than in his public disavowal of

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<sup>5</sup> Mario Basini, “Agenda”, *Western Mail*, Wednesday 27 September (2000).

<sup>6</sup> Mario Basini, “Agenda”, *Western Mail*, Wednesday 27 September (2000).

the 'national' organisation, Plaid Cymru. One can only meditate on what R.S. Thomas's response would have been to being dubbed as "saintly" by Mario Basini!

The Welsh-language press was a different matter altogether. As the main bulk of Thomas's literary work is in English, his centrality as a major Welsh *literary* figure is again somewhat problematic and ambiguous. His vehement contribution as a political voice within the discourse of Welsh nationalism, both from the viewpoint of his practical political work and his prose writing, is indisputable, and it is this, more than anything, which grants him his place within Welsh-language literary culture. However, an interesting epitome of how Thomas is often marginalised by the Welsh-language press can be seen in this following example. The week of Thomas's death, the Welsh-language magazine, *Golwg*, in running a story on a Welsh-born actress Charlie Brooks in the English soap "Eastenders," decided to make her their 'cover feature,' confining R.S. Thomas to a mere centre-spread 'tribute' page. From a cultural point of view, by denying Thomas front-page position, his status as a pivotal Welsh figure, at least within the pages of this particular magazine, is thrown into question, making the *literal* 'centrality' of the tribute to him seem compensatory. There may, of course, have been many reasons why Thomas did not 'make the cover,' such as the financial implications of changing an already-designed cover to fit current events, but nevertheless, the episode remains one of interest. The fact that a non-Welsh-speaking actress, now living and working in London, who had once lived in Barmouth and who "spoke Welsh fluently until she moved away to a drama school in London at fourteen,"<sup>7</sup> is of any importance at all to a Welsh readership is puzzling. This marks the more troubling fact that an overriding, mass 'British' popular

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<sup>7</sup> *Golwg* Issue 13, No. 5, 5 October (2000.): 13. Lois Eckley. My translation.

culture has evidently colonised the Welsh press, to the extent that one can often be confronted with certain celebrities' tenuous links with Wales, even in Welsh-language publications such as *Golwg*. Does the interest in the fiction of Janine Butcher (the character played by Charlie Brooks) over the reality of R.S. Thomas, reflect an ambiguity of identity in Welsh-language readership? It is perhaps significant that beyond his death, R.S. Thomas continues to draw attention to the many inconsistencies and instabilities inherent in Welsh society.

*Barn*, however, provided R.S. Thomas with a far worthier tribute. Not only was Thomas featured on the cover of the edition, but the magazine featured three articles engaging the creative, the critical, and the political, in the figures of poet Menna Elfyn, poet and academic Grahame Davies and the co-founder of Cyfeillion Llŷn, Gruffudd Parry. The overall effect was that of a far more balanced discussion, which, while taking Thomas's nationalist views into account, did not attempt to base interpretation on this single facet of his literary position. Grahame Davies even goes as far to suggest that his nationalist concerns are merely a means of channelling his spiritual energy. He states:

It is merely accidental that his cause happened to be a Welsh one, but it is crucial that it was an anti-modern and an anti-materialist cause. Wales was the land he chose to fight for on behalf of the spirit.<sup>8</sup>

This is a shrewd perception on Davies's behalf, and one which he develops at length in his book *Sefyll yn y Bwlch*.<sup>9</sup> Such an assertion moves away from limited views of Thomas as a 'national' poet and considers the less political motives behind his poetic

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<sup>8</sup> Grahame Davies, *Barn* 453 (October 2000): 24. My translation.

expression, that of spiritual vocation. Davies suggests that Thomas has almost been politically *constructed* to fit certain models of Welsh nationalism, and that it is, in essence, an entirely ‘accidental’ fabrication. It is also implied that what is, in fact, a *spiritually* motivated nationalism may have been restructured and reduced to comply with a simpler, more definable model of Welsh ‘extremism’ and radicalism. Despite the fact that Thomas’s *literal* activism within certain political arenas might disprove these theories, it is certainly refreshing to move away from the stale categorisation that continues to place Thomas firmly within the singular field of nationalism.

A further example of cultural *misrepresentation* was evident in BBC Wales’s coverage of the Westminster Abbey memorial service, as featured on the arts programme “Double Yellow,” broadcast by BBC 2 Wales in May 2001. This seven-minute item followed the young Welsh poet, Owen Sheers, travelling by train from Cardiff to London. The item features Sheers, in video-diary footage, voicing his mixed thoughts concerning the service during his train journey, the inclusion of which seemed to be highlighting the experience of the provincial ‘Welsh boy’ travelling ‘all the way’ from the province and out into the ‘Capital’ city.<sup>10</sup> As if BBC Wales’s implicit construction of Wales as being on the periphery of a British state were not sufficiently problematic, it may also have been evident to many of the viewers of the programme that Owen Sheers was anything

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<sup>9</sup> Grahame Davies, *Sefyll yn y Bwlch* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Owen Sheers remarked: “The fact that, you know, R.S. Thomas’s poems are gonna be read by four really major British writers, you know, some of the best poets from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and that they’re being read in the grandeur of Westminster Abbey, I mean, on the one hand, it’s brilliant, it’s a real recognition of R.S. Thomas’s work, on the other hand I can’t help feeling that it is slightly strange, you know, I’d be intrigued to know what R.S. Thomas would think of it – he was a private person who placed himself very much on the margins of society and the world of literature and poetry and here he is being brought straight into the heart of poetry, and a very sort of English heart as well – Westminster Abbey.”

but the provincial ‘Welsh boy.’ Despite being originally from Abergavenny, he had previously lived and worked in London, and was in effect entering extremely familiar territory, a fact which seems to deny the cultural uprooting implied by his closely-observed train journey. Additionally, nothing serves as a stronger emblem of cultural contradiction in itself than the programme’s producers: the British Broadcasting Company, Wales.

The English press coverage of R.S. Thomas’s death poses yet another problem of identification. Gone was the previous Welsh-press assertion of his being “one of the nation’s greatest writers,”<sup>11</sup> “a giant of poetry,”<sup>12</sup> and “a poet we should be proud of.”<sup>13</sup> In its place was the slightly hesitant recognition of a “misanthrope,”<sup>14</sup> “riddled with contradictions,”<sup>15</sup> “whose nationalism has sometimes been seen as backward looking.”<sup>16</sup> The news coverage also demonstrated that the presence of an alternative culture was not only deeply felt, but, in some cases, deeply resented. Headlines such as “misanthrope who championed the Welsh people and was himself one of the foremost poets in English”<sup>17</sup> questioned the validity of his allegiance, implying the supremacy of the English language over the poet’s political concerns. His oddity as a cultural subject also surfaced as a recurrent reviewing tactic, and opinions such as those stating that his nationalism “made it odd that he should have been one of the best poets writing in

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<sup>11</sup> Bryn Jones and Emyr Williams, *Daily Post* 27 September (2000): 3.

<sup>12</sup> Gwyneth Lewis, *Times Literary Supplement* 27 September (2000): 22.

<sup>13</sup> “Westgate Column,” *Western Mail* 29 September 29 (2000): 10.

<sup>14</sup> “Obituaries,” *Daily Telegraph* 29 September (2000): 29.

<sup>15</sup> Byron Rogers, *The Guardian* 27 September (2000): 24.

<sup>16</sup> Meic Stephens, *The Independent* 27 September (2000): 6.

English” gestured towards an element of unnaturalness in his cultural identity. Thomas was quoted as saying: “Britain does not exist for me, it’s an abstraction forced on the Welsh people,”<sup>18</sup> while the fact of his autobiography having been written in Welsh is also met with certain disdain, being seen not as political intention, but rather as a furtive experiment, containing a certain “mischief.” *The Guardian* states that “the answers his admirers sought were in a language they could not understand,”<sup>19</sup> a statement that not only highlights the concept of a predominantly English readership but also challenges the political and linguistic validity of the publication. It is interesting to note that in 1995, when the English translation of the autobiography appeared, it was met with paradoxical antipathy from a Welsh perspective, John Pikoulis lamenting in the *New Welsh Review* that “what was once an intra-familial discourse has become public property.”<sup>20</sup>

The notion of visual representation also proved significant in the construction of Thomas’s identity, and, to this day, remains one of the most influential aspects in the formation of public opinion of R.S. Thomas outside Wales. Following his death, some, mainly Welsh, papers, published pictures of the poet in his younger days, in which he is seen to be reading contemplatively or harbouring a dry, secretive smile. On the other hand, a number of, mainly English / British, papers, published pictures of what they believed to be the better-known face of Thomas. These were pictures which not only presented the poet as possessing a slightly wild, ogre-like quality, but also confirmed the

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<sup>17</sup> “Obituaries,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 27 September (2000): 29.

<sup>18</sup> “Obituaries,” 29.

<sup>19</sup> Byron Rogers, 24.

<sup>20</sup> John Pikoulis, “R.S. Thomases: ‘composer of the first radio-active verses’, *New Welsh Review* 40 vol. X/III (Spring 1998): 13.

already austere image of Thomas which the English reading public had been harbouring for years. The black and white prints of a scowling, gaunt face against the background of bleak, minimal countryside appeared as a centrepiece for most of the English obituaries, while another favourite was also featured very frequently, indeed in the majority of the London broadsheet newspapers. This was, of course, that of a hostile-looking R.S. Thomas poking his head out of the half-door of the sixteenth-century cottage to which he had retired. It is the picture used as a cover for Furious Interiors by Justin Wintle, a biography written *without* Thomas's consent by an English author, and published by an English press, a book certainly to be judged by its cover. The constant publication of this picture is in itself a kind of cultural assimilation and manipulation, in which an image that corresponds to the already-formed public opinion is chosen, in order to perpetuate a carefully selected fabrication.

The assumptions made by the English media point towards a deep-rooted dismissiveness, not only of the poet's political position, but also, perhaps, of his literary works. Even as far back as 1979, in A Reader's Guide to Fifty Modern British Poets, Michael Schmidt asserted that "Thomas takes his forms for granted, worries little about poetic theory"<sup>21</sup> as if Thomas were in fact a mediocre poet unconcerned with poetic technique. Schmidt further asserts that:

If in each collection there are dozens of limp poetical  
phrases it is because he has not, until his later work,

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Schmidt, A Reader's Guide to Fifty Modern British Poets (London: Heinemann, 1979) 260.



questioned his language: he has questioned his experience  
and adapted a conventional diction.<sup>22</sup>

The misleading description of the “limp poetical phrases” here manifestly throws doubt on any sense of poetic greatness in Thomas’s work. The condescending claim that Thomas has merely “questioned his experience and adapted a conventional diction” completely refutes any idea of *difference* in Thomas’s language, the notion that he might manipulate elements of the English language in order to, as Caradoc Evans states, “reproduce in one language the feel of the other.”<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, it raises the question of how ‘authentic’ a literary figure R.S. Thomas is considered to be within an English literary market, and whether his relationship with this readership has perhaps been ambiguous from the start.

The many documentary films made about Thomas are, on the other hand, slightly more comprehensive, although these, too, fall into the trap of portraying Thomas from a rather contrived viewpoint. The film featured on the *South Bank Show*, broadcast on ITV on 17 February 1991, for instance, contains several complex aural and visual signifiers that contribute to the construction of Thomas as a rather obscure and reclusive figure. Even the music featured in the film plays a part in the depiction. Here, the sound of a raw, discordant cello solo filters over footage of equally mysterious, misty, bleak Welsh landscapes. Melvyn Bragg emphasises his centrality as “one of Britain’s finest poets” but also stresses his peripheral nature as a poet, who has stood “largely in isolation from the schools and movements that sweep the world of contemporary poetry.” In turn, the film

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<sup>22</sup> Schmidt 260.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in T. L. Williams, *Caradoc Evans: Writers of Wales* (University of Wales Press: 1970) 13.

seems almost to insist visually on these images, combining “poetry-video” footage with that of a rather peculiarly-lit Thomas staring vacantly into the open fire in his cottage, almost reminiscent of his fictitious Iago Prytherch. The documentary also features a rather contrived ‘token’ footage of R.S. Thomas conversing in Welsh, another detail that sets him firmly outside a strictly “British” experience. The overall effect of the piece lies between a sense of appreciation and apprehension, in which Thomas, though arguably validated as a literary figure, eludes complete comprehension.

The documentary in the “Bookmark” series for BBC 2 (1986), on the other hand, is more lucid in comparison, and perhaps so because it features the internal dialogue of three leading Welsh academics, M.Wynn Thomas, Ned Thomas and Raymond Garlick. Presented by Ian Hamilton, it focuses mainly on Thomas’s Welsh identity, and the tensions involved in his English-language poetic voice, featuring much of the predictably illustrative footage of the bleak countryside and bare moors. Interestingly, the theme music chosen is again a discordant instrumental solo – music that perhaps proves representative in denoting both the oddity and minimalism of Thomas’s poetic vision. Though the tone of the interviewing is often condescending (for example, Ian Hamilton carefully asks the church warden of Eglwys-fach whether Thomas was “very strict about, sort of, things like Welsh speaking?” And then receives the answer “Well, yes, he *was* a bit of a Welsh fanatic”), these excerpts were juxtaposed with more academic commentary. In defence of Thomas’s use of the English-language, for all his suggested Welsh “fanaticism”, Ned Thomas expresses the view that poetry in English could be a route for the Welsh writer back to one’s national origins. R.S. Thomas therefore attempted to develop an attitude to English, in the words of Ned Thomas, “that was

uncompromisingly Welsh.” M. Wynn Thomas defends the poet’s reclusive nature by placing it on a par with his poetic retreat, in which he “withdraws into the fastness of his own self.” Additionally Raymond Garlick refers to the broadcasting of “Y Llwybrau Gynt” in the 1970s as marking R.S.’s arrival not only as a Welsh speaker, but as “a distinguished Welsh speaker.” In this sense, Thomas is culturally examined from within the national core, and by academics familiar with the Welsh cultural scene, able to take a more immediate account of Thomas’s duality on a linguistic, as well as academic, level. This film strives to clarify the position of the R.S.Thomas who, according to the churchwarden “never answered” the question as to why all the poetry of such a fervent Welsh nationalist should be written in English.

Some of the ambiguity surrounding R.S. Thomas may have been linked to the literary esteem afforded to his predecessor, Dylan Thomas. Despite being thematically, stylistically and certainly politically disparate, they were also, undeniably, contemporaries: R.S. was born in 1913, Dylan in 1914, though Dylan Thomas died three years before R.S. Thomas entered onto the English literary scene. Their profiles as great, or ‘classic’, literary figures, who both happened to belong to a tradition of Welsh “Thomases” meant that they were constantly compared. Furthermore, there also seemed to be an ongoing literary (and populist) debate as to who should be considered the better poet, and the most “representatively” Welsh of the two: a continual and relentless issue that attempted to force literary critics into two separate, and superficial, factions of favouritism. This resulted in the rather ludicrous coverage in 1998 of the *Western Mail*’s feature “Battle of the Bards,” an article written in direct response to Katie Gramich’s assertion that R.S. Thomas should be named Welsh poet of the century, with Dylan as a

close second.<sup>24</sup> As Dylan Thomas had long been considered the ‘people’s choice,’ in both Britain and America, this assertion seemed to be somewhat of an unjust turnaround, a reaction which implies the two Thomases are also class signifiers within the public arena. Populist texts such as An A-Z of Wales and the Welsh states quite firmly that “Dylan Thomas is the Welsh poet in essence, throwing words around like confetti, unlike the more restrained (and Christian) R.S. Thomas.”<sup>25</sup> Additionally, Dylan’s picture is also featured on the book’s cover, directly opposite none other than Catherine Zeta-Jones. This certainly affirms the notion of Dylan’s vaster ‘mass’ appeal in face of R.S. Thomas’s abstruse intellectualism. The slightly more high-brow Wales: A 2000 Piece Jig-Saw defines Dylan, rather dismissively, as a “Hard living / playing Welsh writer,”<sup>26</sup> while the acknowledgement that “he is the only twentieth century Welsh poet commemorated in Poet’s Corner in Westminster Abbey”<sup>27</sup> is somewhat defused by the fact of Westminster Abbey’s recognition of R.S. The definition of R.S. elevates the poet above his contemporary stating that he is “regarded as one of the best poets writing in English in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>28</sup> Meic Stephens stresses that Dylan Thomas’s greatness lies in the general gaze of “the world’s eyes” while “his namesake, R.S. Thomas is, in the

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<sup>24</sup> Darren Waters, “Words fly in fierce battle of the bards,” *Western Mail* Saturday, 2 May (1998): 3. Katie Gramich, “Welsh Greats of the Century No 1: Poets,” *New Welsh Review* 40 vol. X/III (Spring 1998): 9-12.

<sup>25</sup> Terry Breverton, An A Z of Wales and the Welsh (Swansea: Christopher Davies, 2000) 225.

<sup>26</sup> Gareth Shaw and Paul Shaw, Wales: a 2000 Piece Jig-Saw (Llanrwst: Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 2000) 193.

<sup>27</sup> Gareth Shaw and Paul Shaw 193.

<sup>28</sup> Gareth Shaw and Paul Shaw 194.

view of many, the better poet.”<sup>29</sup> An article in The Times following R.S.’s death even suggests that Dylan’s appeal is more external and universal, whereas R.S. remains an introverted discourse. The article denotes that R.S. “was a foil to his countryman; Dylan Thomas, whose effusive, wordy (some would say windy) proved more to the taste of outsiders.”<sup>30</sup> There is also the implication that Dylan’s concerns were less localised and internal, and therefore more universal and accessible: “where Dylan lushly hymned himself, R.S, in austere, dogged, technically unadventurous verses, spoke of the hill people of Wales.”<sup>31</sup> Such a perception is manifestly based on generalisations of the work of both poets, while a more detailed study would serve to assess the complexity in Dylan Thomas’s work, and his frequent inaccessibility.

It was in 1956, three years after Dylan Thomas drank himself to death in New York whilst on a lecture tour, that R.S.Thomas arrived on the English literary scene. It is perhaps revealing that his first (English) publisher, Rupert Hart-Davis, thought it appropriate that this volume by a largely-unknown Welsh poet should contain an introduction by a well-known English literary figure in order to generate interest. The chosen author was John Betjeman, who, by the mid-50s had become not only a well-known literary figure, but a ‘personality’ regularly seen on television. His subsequent appointment as Poet Laureate, in 1972, also seems to testify to his ‘greatness’ as a British literary figure. And yet, Betjeman’s introduction can be seen to shadow and influence the work in several ways. M. Wynn Thomas has stated that “it is very largely on Betjeman’s compromising terms that Thomas’s British reputation has been built over the last forty

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<sup>29</sup> Meic Stephens, “Obituaries,” *The Independent* 27 September (2000): 6.

<sup>30</sup> “Obituaries,” *The Times* 27 September (2000): 25.

years,”<sup>32</sup> suggesting that the notion of introduction also carries with it certain colonial implications. Betjeman’s description of Thomas as “essentially a local poet”<sup>33</sup> appropriates Thomas into an acceptable colonial form, and may also have been perceived in terms of the ‘next’ Welsh Thomas arriving on the scene. A reassuring bid, perhaps, to prove that nothing rural in its concern could prove threatening or disruptive to the metropolitan core.

R.S. Thomas’s poetry also seemed to fit, quite conveniently, with new trends in the English literary world. Early in the 1950s, there were signs that a new generation of poets was about to appear, one that would provide a reaction to the previously fashionable metaphorical extravagance and obscurity of such poets as Edith Sitwell, Dylan Thomas, and the Neo-Romantics. R.S. Thomas, with his “bleak, unsparing directness”<sup>34</sup>, appeared to be another example of this new, laconic ‘voice’ of the “Movement” of the 1950s. As John Press states in A Map of Modern English Verse: “although he clearly owes nothing to the Movement poets, his work exhibits many of the virtues which they admired.”<sup>35</sup> This highlights the fact that Thomas, despite having formulated his poetic style outside the considerations of a contemporary literary mould, could be easily appropriated to fit its requirements. Interestingly, from this it seems that ideas of nationhood were not central to Thomas’s impact as a poet. Despite the fact that the three volumes mentioned here, The Stones of the Field (1946), An Acre of Land

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<sup>31</sup> “Obituaries,” *The Times* 27 September (2000): 25.

<sup>32</sup> M. Wynn Thomas, “Reviewing R.S.” *Books in Wales/Llais Llyfrau*. (Summer 1993): 5.

<sup>33</sup> John Betjeman, Song at Year’s Turning (Rupert Hart-Davis, 1956) 11.

<sup>34</sup> John Press, Map of Modern English Verse (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) 255.

<sup>35</sup> Press 255.

(1952), Song at the Year's Turning (1955) contained some of Thomas's most poignant 'national' poems such as "Welsh History", "Welsh Landscape" and "A Welshman to any Tourist," the only reference Press makes to Wales are ones stating that Thomas's "first two volumes...were printed by *small*, little-known firms in Wales" and that his poetry is located in "the *small* world of the Welsh hill country."<sup>36</sup> Even the deprecatory tone of the description heightens the colonial tension between Thomas's 'Wales' and the external British arena within which it has been located. Returning to Michael Schmidt's chapter, one finds a similar reductive descriptive method, which suggests that within Thomas's poetry "Wales provides a pulpit" from which "Thomas *registers* his Welshness,"<sup>37</sup> assertions which imply that nationality is merely another poetic method employed by the poet, rather than a dominating force behind the poetry. Thomas is assimilated, therefore, within an essentially 'British' / 'English,' model of literature: one that permits only the emphasis of the most 'appropriate' qualities of his poetry, symptomatic of the way in which 'Britain' controls and dominates images of Wales to suit its own purpose. To consider English interpretations of Thomas's poetry is, according to M.Wynn Thomas, "to gain insight into some of the ways in which Wales is ideologically 'managed' as part of the anglocentric British system's self-serving programme of containment."<sup>38</sup> This 'programme of containment,' whether it be it exercised on R.S. Thomas or Wales itself, attempted to condition any sense of a recognisable, and possibly threatening other into a

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<sup>36</sup> Press 255. My italics.

<sup>37</sup> Schmidt 260.

<sup>38</sup> M. Wynn Thomas, *Llais Llyfrau* 5.

more lucid and controlled form, so that the British empire and its 'nations' did not seem too disparate.

An interesting example of the marketing of R.S. Thomas by English publishers was the appearance, in 1996, of the Phoenix Paperback edition of the misleadingly-titled R.S. Thomas: Love Poems. Despite being scant of sentiment and opening with the poem "The Hill Farmer Speaks" (a poem whose first lines are "I am the farmer, stripped of love"<sup>39</sup>), Phoenix compiled several, greatly differing, poems, under the populist title of "Love Poems" presumably in order to promote the idea of Thomas's accessibility. In this sense, the poetry itself is, again, bound up in "a process of containment," which condenses the diversity of the poetry into one-dimensional clarity. As a result, R.S. Thomas seems to be *understood* more easily whereas in reality, he is being *explained away*.

However, this method of literary 'colonisation' was not strictly Anglo-centric. As M. Wynn Thomas points out, Wales itself was equally culpable with regard to the (re)construction of Thomas's literary identity. He states that "if Britain has successfully contrived to produce a lesser R.S. Thomas to suit its own tastes and purposes, then so has Wales."<sup>40</sup> Thomas's inclusion in the curriculum of Welsh schools is one example of this. Set alongside other distinguished Welsh writers in English, such as Glyn Jones, his poetry is read almost solely from the viewpoint of his early poetry, from 1946 to 1968, excluding a whole body of work which was produced up until the late 1990s. The curriculum's focus, therefore, is obviously on the more 'accessible' pieces, more

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<sup>39</sup> R.S. Thomas, Love Poems (London: Phoenix, 1996) 1.

<sup>40</sup> M. Wynn Thomas *Llais Llyfrau* 5.



specifically those generating a particular ‘Welsh’ interest. In some cases, and more especially perhaps in the case of Glyn Jones, the work presented extremely teachable “Anglo-Welsh” texts which afforded non-Welsh-speaking students knowledge of Welsh culture through the medium of their own language. Becoming overly fixated on Thomas’s presentation of Wales, however, threatened to obscure the actuality of the poet altogether. M. Wynn Thomas argues that

The attraction for some . . . has been Thomas’s stress on the indissoluble link between national identity and the Welsh language, his anti-industrial pastoralism, his pride in the ancientness of indigenous Welsh culture, and his stand against the creep of Englishness. These are all prominent figures of his early poetry that have been conspicuously absent from the poems he’s written over the last twenty years, which are accordingly neglected out of difference, or simply out of incomprehension.<sup>41</sup>

As Wynn Thomas suggests, R.S. Thomas provides an easily manipulable model for several different strands of national identification. Largely based again on the 1946-1968 R.S. Thomas, these themes offer a kind of Welsh legacy upon which to fix similar ideas of national identity. The result of such reductive critical appreciation is that his poems tend to be placed under broad headings such as nationalism, human interest, religion and nature. The poems the *Western Mail* chose to print as a brief ‘anthology’ at his death is utterly symptomatic: “Welsh Landscape,” “A Marriage”, “Kneeling”, and “A Peasant” -

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<sup>41</sup> M. Wynn Thomas *Llais Llyfrau* 5-6.

three of which are taken from the stable image of the 1946-1968 Thomas, while “A Marriage,” published in 1992, is moving, accessible, and of course, personal. This provided the predictably stable range of poetry that strove to manifest Thomas’s ‘general’ concerns as a poet.

As Tony Bianchi argues in Wales: the imagined nation, Thomas was also a perfect subject of identification for a non-Welsh-speaking, Welsh-identified audience, making Thomas “the first Anglo-Welsh poet successfully to interpellate his English-speaking readership within the discourse of cultural nationalism.”<sup>42</sup> Heavily shadowed by the Welsh-speaking intelligentsia (to whom Bianchi argues the English-speaking Welsh bourgeoisie saw itself as “institutionally and intellectually subordinate”<sup>43</sup>), the Anglo-Welsh “tradition” saw in R.S. the perfect example of hybrid identity. This again provided a model, within which the Anglo-Welsh audience could not only incorporate itself as a kind of implied reader, but also gain its legitimacy as a cultural construct. As Bianchi states of Anglo-Welsh literature:

It has provided the material with which a new cultural intelligentsia has attempted to mould itself in Wales: not yet sufficiently confident or entrenched to challenge the established Welsh-speaking intelligentsia . . . but aware of a vast English-speaking readership for whom they must “become a voice, drawing them back to the tradition from

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<sup>42</sup> Tony Bianchi, “R.S. Thomas and his readers,” Wales: the imagined nation. Ed. Tony Curtis (Bridgend: Poetry Wales P, 1986) 85.

<sup>43</sup> Bianchi 85.

which they have become separated and, in so doing forging  
a new tradition, establishing a new literature.”<sup>44</sup>

As Bianchi suggests, this tradition was continually aware of the fact that there was a larger, and a more culturally *valid*, tradition overlooking its actions: a tradition with its own, much deeper, literary roots. Bianchi draws attention to the fact that poets such as Gerallt Lloyd Owen and T.H. Parry Williams have long excluded English-speaking readership by their stress on the intra-familial ‘voice’ of their poetry. The Anglo-Welsh, on the other hand, did not have such privileged methods of identification and, rather, chose the poetry of R.S. Thomas as literature within which “an English speaking readership in Wales has been able, for the first time, to recognise itself *as* a specific and corporate readership.”<sup>45</sup> Again, Thomas undergoes appropriation. He is not, as one would assume, inspiring anew the notion of national identity, but rather being posited as a concurring feature within a ready-made model of nationalism, and as Ned Thomas states in the “Bookmark” documentary: “Once the slot has been constructed, the poetry has to be cut to fit.” The impact of this is twofold. Not only is Thomas being used to advocate the very existence of the identity he disputes but also, as one of the few common focal points between the two traditions, he serves to unite, however tenuously, the Welsh and the English-speaking Welsh i.e. aiding the construction of an English-speaking Welsh identity.

Bianchi’s argument is that the Anglo-Welsh ‘tradition’, in its hunger for national empathy and patriotic identification, subsequently obscures the brilliance of Thomas’s

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<sup>44</sup> Bianchi 75. Bianchi is quoting from an essay by Raymond Garlick in Dock Leaves in 1951.

later work and chooses, quite consciously, to see him as a 'national' poet. As his poetry, in Bianchi's words, "has lent itself uniquely well to serve the interests of a particular readership,"<sup>46</sup> much of the impact of his work is lost, as he becomes "reconstructed in the image of his own audience"<sup>47</sup>: manipulated to serve their needs rather than his own. It is because of this kind of exclusivity that critics such as M.Wynn Thomas have felt the need to highlight the public's neglect of other aspects of Thomas's poetry:

Why has his religious poetry never been carefully studied alongside that of Geoffrey Hill or Paul Celan? Why is his poetry of place not examined with reference to the achievements of Walcott or Wendell Berry? Why has his mysticism not been compared to that of W.S. Merwin? Why, in other words, has no serious attempt yet been made to take his full measure as a modern poet?<sup>48</sup>

This statement certainly registers the dangers of specific partisan readership. Despite the fact that such poetry testifies to Thomas's sheer gift as a poet, a gift comparable with several great literary figures world-wide, its failure to adhere to the prerequisites of the specific Anglo-Welsh, and often, Welsh readership, renders it insignificant to the majority of his (mainly Anglo-) Welsh readers. It seems that the readership is both limiting and reductive in its viewpoint, falling into the trap of seeing Thomas's poetry from an overly political viewpoint. Thomas's poetry is again greatly reduced, becoming

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<sup>45</sup> Bianchi 84

<sup>46</sup> Bianchi 86.

<sup>47</sup> Bianchi 88.

once more representative of the 1946-1968 Thomas, a Thomas who provides a far more stable, albeit idiosyncratic, model of nationalism.

Given the range of ways both R.S. Thomas the poet and R.S. Thomas the man were regarded in his lifetime, it is not surprising that reactions to his death were so various and complex. It has to be said that, given Thomas's temperament, it is doubtful as to whether he would have commended even the *Welsh* commemorations, of which there were several.<sup>49</sup> Westminster Abbey was, of course, a different matter. Here Welsh and English audiences were joined together to witness what many would perceive to be a post-colonial nightmare: a poet whose conviction that Britain was merely "an abstraction forced on the Welsh people" becoming himself institutionalised within a British establishment. If, furthermore, steps were taken to commemorate R.S., like Dylan, within Poet's Corner along with other great British bards of the century, this would be a concrete realisation of Thomas's assimilation into British culture. And this would, of course, make Thomas's idealistic idea of uniting the "poem in the rock and/the poem in the mind" resound with an intensely bitter irony.

The only thing that seemed to authenticate the Welsh element of Thomas's commemorative service in Westminster was the audience itself, dotted with familiar Welsh faces, who were either personal acquaintances of Thomas, or ardent admirers of his life and work. In a sense, however, they were also involved in the same process of

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<sup>48</sup> M. Wynn Thomas *Llais Llyfrau* 7.

<sup>49</sup> The most notable, perhaps were the evenings entitled "R.S.Thomas: A Celebration" held consecutively in North and South Wales, which included around twenty contributors. Also, further down the line, a commemorative libretto was commissioned, written and performed as part of Tŷ Newydd's Literature Festival in the Spring of 2001, again along with contributions from academics, writers and personal acquaintances. The very body responsible for sponsoring both events, 'Academi,' was, however, well aware of R.S. Thomas's wish that no such event should take place following his death, and that he

containment, and were indistinctly and anonymously merged in a sea of other, more 'English' readers of his work. Barbara Prys-Williams's description of the moment when the "sleek, Sunday-best poets processed down the nave each splendidly escorted by an Abbey dignitary"<sup>50</sup> heightens the sense of inappropriate exclusivity attached to the event, unnecessarily elevating the status of the poets and performers by creating a divide between them and their audience. Would it not have been more appropriate, in this case, for the dignitaries to have greeted the audience as they walked in, and seated them accordingly, asking not the question "Bride or Groom?" but rather "Cymru or Wales?"

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Taking into consideration, therefore, the range of ways in which R.S. Thomas and his work have been constructed, and appropriated, both before and after his death, one embarks on another reading of the poet and his work with some qualms. The present study seeks to approach the issue of the poet's identity *as an issue*, and moreover to indicate the ways in which the matter of his own identity was an issue *for the poet himself*, throughout his career. Indeed it could be argued that this is a central issue in R.S. Thomas's work, and one that serves to unite the various phases of his work.

In particular, this work considers the early stages of the poet's career, and its focus lies specifically on the poet from birth up until his move to the parish of Aberdaron in 1967. Although the study occasionally takes into consideration work produced beyond that date, it is primarily from the viewpoint of those psychological developments from 1913-1967 that this later work is viewed. Additionally, it is perhaps necessary to stress at

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should remain guarded from the public eye. And yet, as all three events proved to be hugely successful, it perhaps testifies to the sheer strength and volume of his Welsh audience that such a decision was overruled.

the beginning of this thesis that this is not so much a detailed analysis of R.S. Thomas's poetry, as an analysis of Thomas's identity as manifested in his poetry, prose, interviews and autobiographical writing. The main objective of the thesis, therefore, is to consider Thomas's *identity*, as revealed in his writing, and the ways in which many of its instabilities and fragmentation can be understood in a more detailed manner through adopting particular discursive methods, and by placing him within a certain theoretical framework.

The first chapter, for example, explores and employs the discourse of the uncanny, a theory developed by Freud, and subsequently by several other, more contemporary critics, like Nicholas Royle, David Punter and Elizabeth Wright. This is, ultimately, a theory that focuses on the emergence of a particular "quality of feeling" that is often seen to pervade secure identities, a discursive strategy that lends itself particularly well to the study of literature. The first chapter proceeds to evaluate Thomas's own experience of the uncanny as manifested throughout his autobiographical accounts of his childhood and upbringing. His experience of the uncanny during these early years is seen to be acute, and this chapter also seeks to demonstrate how Thomas goes on to deconstruct the identity he feels has been foisted upon him by his upbringing. In order to do so, Thomas must seek to identify himself in terms of an identity based on a subjective notion of "the true Wales of my imagination" (A, 10), that becomes in many ways (especially so in this formative, early poetic period) Thomas's sole objective, and a means of counteracting alienation.

The second chapter seeks to take this notion a step further, and to show how Thomas, in identifying with the Scots poet, Hugh MacDiarmid, attempts to cement his

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<sup>50</sup> Prys-Williams 99.

identity through instruction and imitation. In effect, Thomas allows himself to be influenced by another 'Celtic' writer, in order to evolve a distinctive Welsh identity, putting the Scottish ideology to particular 'Welsh' use. However, as becomes evident throughout the chapter, the uncanny is also at work in MacDiarmid himself, Thomas having himself chosen to identify with a Celtic figure whose identity is perhaps as transitory and unfulfilled as his own.

Finally, this work takes into consideration Thomas's struggle to construct a unified, fulfilling authentic sense of self, as he begins writing about Wales, and considering his own place within it. During this chapter, the uncanny is transposed to a cultural context, becoming 'the unhomely.' This term, which has its root in the *unheimlich* (a word directly linked to the uncanny by Freud) is developed by the post-colonial critic Homi K. Bhabha. Through adapting Thomas's questions of national identity in light of many of Bhabha's theories of ambivalence, stereotyping, and the double, it is also possible to consider how the *unheimlich* becomes a specific part of Thomas's 'cultural' experience. The struggle to form an identity is, for R.S. Thomas, exacerbated by his post-colonial situation.

Ultimately, this thesis will attempt to explore Thomas's development through the varying phases of the uncanny and the unhomely, towards an attempt to discover a more unified sense of self. Through this, it is essential also to consider Thomas as searching not only for an unified Wales, or for an unified post-colonial identity, but for unity *within* himself, and for a kind of spiritual transcendence beyond the fragmentary, insecure, transitory self he so often confronts in his mirror.



## 1

## “Betrayed by wilderness within”<sup>51</sup>: R.S. Thomas and the Uncanny

It is undoubtedly related to what is frightening – to what arouses dread and horror; equally certainly, too, the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general. Yet we may expect that a special core of feeling is present which justifies the use of a special conceptual term. One is curious to know what this common core is which allows us to distinguish as ‘uncanny’ certain things which lie within the field of what is frightening.<sup>52</sup>

As Freud argues here in his 1919 essay, the uncanny is, by nature, a mysterious and ambivalent experience. It is described as a “a special core of feeling . . . which justifies the use of a special conceptual term,” a feeling that gives rise to “repulsion and distress” in the field of aesthetics, “undoubtedly related to what is frightening – to what arouses dread and horror” (U, 219). But it cannot be viewed solely in terms of negation, for also contained within its sense of unfamiliarity and terror is the intimation of the familiar, comforting and recognisable. “The uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads

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<sup>51</sup> From the poem “A Thought from Nietzsche” SYT 20. “You are betrayed by wilderness within / That spreads upward and outward like a stain.”

<sup>52</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, ed. & trans. James Strachey, vol. XXII (London: Hogarth, 1953) 219-252. Further references will be given parenthetically in the text (U).

back to what is known of old and long familiar” (U, 220), writes Freud, and indeed it is this strange conjunction of the familiar and the alien that is the dynamic of the uncanny’s power to disturb. The idea that it “leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (U, 220) also suggests that it is inexorably linked to one’s own individual experience, that it gives expression to repressed experiences, and rouses the unconscious mind. While it has the capacity to cause unsettling, disorientating feelings, it does so precisely because the individual confronts something already present in him/herself. It is, in a sense, a familiar horror, a recurrent dread relating to something of which one is already at some level aware.

Freud is “curious to know what this common core is which allows us to distinguish as “uncanny certain things which lie within the field of what is frightening” (U, 219), for as Freud asserts, quite rightly, not every experience of horror or fright can be categorised as uncanny. One of the main strategies Freud employs in order to define more clearly the seemingly indefinable uncanny, is to explore the uncanny as a discourse of the ‘self,’ seeing it as a personal reaction to one’s individual surroundings, that occurs for a *reason*, rather than merely being a random occurrence. “The better orientated in his environment a person is,” writes Freud, “the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it” (U, 221). One somehow makes oneself susceptible to the uncanny according to Freud, for the uncanny is never simply ‘out-there’ waiting to strike, but is rather an individual condition that depends on one’s own personal circumstances, one’s relation to objects and subjects in the surrounding world.

In an exploration of the etymological roots of the term “uncanny”, Freud attempts to suggest that the word is somehow inherently ambiguous. Linguistic usage, according to Freud, can provide useful parallels with individual cases of the uncanny at work. Its German equivalent *unheimlich* literally means ‘unhomely’ or ‘not-at-home,’ suggesting an unsettling quality, of being somehow ‘elsewhere,’ displaced from a familiar, comforting environment. Even more unsettling, additionally, is the fact that the word *unheimlich* has a close relationship with its ‘other’ and opposite, *heimlich*, so that the distinction between the two is often blurred. As Freud struggles to define the difference, he ultimately concludes: “*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*” (U, 226). The *heimlich* it would seem is, quite literally, *at-home* in the *unheimlich*, both in the physical sense of being incorporated within the word itself, and in the effect it has on the meaning of its opposite, confusing any clear, distinct meaning. This is further implied when Freud considers another definition of *heimlich* – secret and hidden – which imbues the familiarity posed by its primary definition with an altogether darker meaning. The notions of comfort and homeliness are transformed; the home becomes that place in which one is able to hide, to bury oneself, to close oneself off. It is, as Freud discovers, “concealed, kept from sight, so that others do not get to know of or about it, withheld from others” (U, 223). The overlapping of the *heimlich* and *unheimlich* becomes representative of the uncanny moment itself. The uncanny is that moment at which the unknown, the unhomely, suddenly becomes canny, known and familiar, a paradox that highlights another of the ‘key’ components of the uncanny, the problem of definition. At

the same time, Freud points out that “many languages are without a word for this particular shade of what is frightening” (U, 221), so that this abyss, this etymological conflation further intensifies the uncanny dimension, for the uncanny is also to do with loss and absence.

One of the manifestations of the uncanny is the way in which it destabilises identity, and one is often made to feel ‘outside’ oneself, through sudden, alienating factors, that lead one to believe that one’s identity is not fixed, or stable, but rather capable of crumbling at any given moment. For Freud, this sense of insecurity is often symbolised by the appearance of the double. The double can be a creation, or even an actuality, which in some way challenges one’s own individual identity. It can occur in the appearance of someone who is similar to oneself, while it can also be present in the emergence of someone who has the same name, and yet who is fundamentally a very different person. It can also be present in the strange identical nature of the actions of two people, and it can also be present when a fictional character is created, who begins to have some bearing on its creator, so that the two become confused. As Freud writes:

It is marked by the fact that the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self. (U, 235)

The uncanny is present in the fact that one is somehow *not-oneseif* in the presence of the double; one is removed from one’s ‘natural’ or ‘true’ identity and one must question one’s identity from a different perspective, from the outside. The double is both

reassuring and frightening – the duplication of one’s self being both an assurance of one’s preservation, and survival, while at the same time indicating a kind of disunity within oneself, becoming once more a problem of definition and of self-definition. “From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death,” writes Freud. As Freud suggests, the double is not so much to do with “primary narcissism” (U, 235), that is, providing reassurance through the projection and enhancement of oneself, but is more to do with challenging and indeed, threatening, any secure sense of self.

It has been argued that Freud himself becomes a kind of double within this particular text. Nicholas Royle has noted the ‘doubling’ effect of Freud’s role as narrator, in remarking that “This essay gives us two Freuds, or a kind of double-Freud, and this double spends the essay investigating the importance among other things of the idea of the double.”<sup>53</sup> Royle’s argument is that the text of “The Uncanny” becomes symptomatic of the ways in which Freud has two personalities as a psychoanalyst. Royle reminds the reader of “Freud the patriarchal, bourgeois, nineteenth-century Viennese Jew, who believed that everything had to do with sex,” and contrasts this with “a Freud who did not fully realize what he was saying, not least because these implications regularly run counter to his own proposed themes and assumptions.” In Royle’s opinion, this essay in particular demonstrates Freud moving from one identity to another, constantly losing sight of himself as he does, becoming “one of the most dramatic and stimulating manifestations of these two Freuds.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Nicholas Royle, “The Uncanny”, Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (Dorchester: Pearson, Longman, 2004) 34-41.

It is necessary, therefore, in reading this text, to consider the part the uncanny plays in Freud's narration, and the impact it has on Freud himself. There are many instances in which Freud comes up against a problem of definition, and in which he reveals a great deal of his own instability of self in addressing this particular field. While it is Freud's intention to "collect all those properties of persons, things, sense-impressions, experiences and situations that arouse in us the feeling of uncanniness" (U, 220), acknowledging himself as part of a collective responsive to this automated feeling, he elsewhere denies that he himself has any susceptibility to it whatsoever. Referring to himself in the third person (a distancing technique that could be said to be another symptom of the uncanny, for Freud is both author and commentator) Freud writes: "it is long since he has experienced or heard of anything which has given him an uncanny impression." This being the case, Freud claims that "he must start by translating himself into that state of feeling, by awakening in himself the possibility of experiencing it" (U, 220). By stating this, Freud evidently believes that it is a state that he himself can *choose* to enter of his own accord, even though such an intention ultimately undermines the very basis of the uncanny for which he has so rigorously argued a case. Freud thus demonstrates another component of the uncanny, that of the fear of experiencing intellectual insecurity. Having propounded the uncanny as somehow linked to one's relationship with oneself, Freud is thus determined to reassert control over his actions, stressing that he is not 'lost' in the uncanny, but rather able to control his own function within it. "The writer of the present contribution," relates Freud of himself, "indeed, must himself plead guilty to a special obtuseness in the matter, where extreme delicacy of

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<sup>54</sup> Royle 39.

perception would be more in place,” as though he is in some way claiming that he has no sensitivity to the uncanny. This, in itself, is perhaps an indication that the uncanny has a stronger hold on Freud than he may have first anticipated, and he attempts to distance himself from it, noting that “the quality in question will be unhesitatingly recognized by most people” (U, 220), rather than acknowledge his own susceptibility to it. As a result it becomes evident that the uncanny is at work in Freud himself, that the Freud of the uncanny has somehow become ‘double,’ claiming himself to be an external observer of the uncanny, while he is in fact a subject of the uncanny.

Freud’s 1919 study of the uncanny has been used as a starting point for several other discussions. One such study is Nicholas Royle’s recent book, The Uncanny, a comprehensive discussion of the uncanny, the aim of which is to provide “a more general cultural and historical context for thinking about the uncanny in general.”<sup>55</sup> Royle’s study discusses at length the intensely ‘personal’ component of the uncanny, focusing on varying examples of social, cultural and literary unease in which one’s selfhood becomes disrupted or distorted by disorientating dimensions. He writes:

The uncanny involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced. Suddenly one’s sense of oneself . . . seems strangely questionable. The uncanny is a crisis of the proper: it entails a critical disturbance of what is proper (from the Latin *proprius*, ‘own’) a disturbance of the very

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<sup>55</sup> Nicholas Royle, The Uncanny, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) 1. Further references will be given parenthetically in the text (Uncanny).

idea of personal or private property including the properness of proper names, one's so-called 'own' name, but also the proper names of others, of places, institutions and events. (Uncanny, 1)

It is, as he suggests here, a 'crisis of the proper' which explores the constitutive elements of one's 'world' and 'reality', challenging one's sense of home or place within society, often rendering the subject alien and estranged in seemingly familiar territory. "It has to do with a sense of ourselves as double, split, at odds with ourselves" (Uncanny, 6), Royle adds, indicating how one's sense of individual security becomes strangely falsified, imbuing the individual with a sense of insecurity, 'homelessness' and displacement. The uncanny is also closely linked to a sense of fright or terror as it occurs in one's familiar world, involving the questioning of exclusively personal factors such as experience and memory, that can suddenly cease to be one's 'own.' Royle also draws out experiences of the uncanny within the sphere of 'real life,' manifesting how such examples ultimately relate to experiences of uncanniness within the literary.

Royle reinforces the notion of the uncanny as lending itself particularly well to the study of literature. He notes how the uncanny can haunt, inhabit and pervade literature, so that it often becomes a case not only of reading a particular text *as* uncanny, but rather of drawing out its inherently uncanny characteristics. Indeed, for Royle, literature itself *is* uncanny; it is the point at which truth and fiction become commingled and interchangeable. As Royle argues:

it also has to do with how the 'literary' and the 'real' can seem to merge into one another. On the one hand,



uncanniness could be defined as occurring when 'real' everyday life suddenly takes on a disturbingly 'literary' or 'fictional' quality. On the other hand, literature itself could be defined as the discourse of the uncanny: literature is the kind of writing which most persistently and most provocatively engages with the uncanny aspects of experience, thought and feeling.<sup>56</sup>

The discourse of the literary is somehow *inherently* uncanny, for it involves the fictionalisation of reality. Writing is somehow to be not-at-home in one's experience. Reading, also, often involves 'the willing suspension of disbelief' on behalf of the reader for the text to take on its 'realistic' dimension. In order to consume the reality of the text, one must therefore cut oneself off from one's 'own' reality, and thus one departs from the realm of the *proprius*. Fiction, it seems, is always somehow dependent on the 'real' for its existence and frame of reference, and yet is also able to create what is essentially an unreal world within itself, an universe that has no relevance to the 'real world' in which it exists. The uncanny is also present in readership and response. Often readers are judgmental of a text because they do not 'believe in it', or feel that it is not 'realistic' enough, highlighting the expectation that fiction must in some way reflect reality, although it is not in its nature or description, as 'fiction', to do so. As well as casting light on the 'real' world, therefore, literature also has the ability to make the world new and unfamiliar to the reader.

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<sup>56</sup> Royle 35.

A further disorientating effect is created in reading factual texts, such as autobiography. To put one's 'own' experiences into writing is to renounce one's ownership of that experience. In writing one's life, one is in fact becoming estranged from that life in some way, the life becoming claimed by fiction. And yet, despite the fictive quality, one expects, in reading autobiography, to glean something of the 'true' identity of the writer, such is the paradox of committing one's life as 'story,' of transferring the 'real' to the page.

It is perhaps inevitable that any kind of reading of R.S. Thomas as uncanny would begin with a consideration of his autobiography *Neb*.<sup>57</sup> 'Neb', like the term 'uncanny', is also strangely inhabited by its other. Although the word seemingly translates as 'No-one,' Jason Walford Davies has demonstrated its "jack-knife ambiguity" in pointing out that "'neb' in Welsh actually means someone." (A, x) What he means by this, and the *University of Wales Dictionary* points out, is that the literal meaning of 'neb,' in Welsh, is "someone, anyone, (any person)"<sup>58</sup> and that its usage refers to presence, rather than the presumed absence. There is a sense of ambiguity, therefore, in calling himself 'Neb' which, as Jason Walford Davies remarks, "emphasises the sheer Welsh *otherness* of this major English-language poet." (A, xi) Even in calling himself 'neb,' Thomas shows himself to have knowledge of the etymological propensities of the Welsh word itself, and the term may not therefore be as negative or unconfident, certainly from a cultural point of view, as it first appears.

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<sup>57</sup> I refer here to the original Welsh language text for the purpose of the discussion. Further references will be given as *Autobiographies* (A). This also includes the introduction, written by Jason Walford Davies, the editor and translator.

<sup>58</sup> *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru: A Dictionary of the Welsh Language*, Part XLI, NAF-OBO (Caerdydd: Prifysgol Cymru, 1990) 2560.

R.S. Thomas's act of writing his autobiography in the third person raises numerous questions. As previously mentioned, autobiography manifests the process of estranging one's self from one's own life and history, becoming, to borrow Julia Kristeva's term, a stranger to oneself.<sup>59</sup> Strangely enough, Freud also refers to himself in the third person in "The Uncanny." Royle asks "what is happening when someone begins a text by referring to himself in the third person?" (Uncanny, 7) and goes on to suggest that what *is* happening is that there is a sense in which the self has entered the realm of the uncanny, that one begins to perceive oneself as somehow a stranger. Royle states that it is:

impossible to think about the uncanny without this involving a sense of what is autobiographical, self-centred, based in one's own experience. But it is also impossible to conceive of the uncanny without a sense of ghostliness, a sense of strangeness given to dissolving all assurances about the identity of the self. (Uncanny, 16)

The assumed distance from oneself, therefore, the sense of strangeness, is at once an avowal of one's own self-intimacy, one's self-awareness. Thomas, in choosing a 'distancing' narrative, draws the focus all the more closely on himself. As Royle states of Freud, the third person narrative "seems to be intended to distance Freud himself from any direct, personal experience of his subject; but of course it also has the opposite effect" (Uncanny, 17). In the same way, Thomas's third-person narrative in fact

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<sup>59</sup> A notion borrowed from the title of Julia Kristeva's study, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (Columbia University Press, 1991), a text which will be referred to later on in the chapter.

intensifies the personal aspect of the writing, highlighting at once a problematic, intricate 'self' that deserves further attention.

In reading Autobiographies, one is immediately aware of the author's apparent susceptibility to the uncanny, in the sense of "what arouses dread and horror." In recalling his childhood, Thomas consciously addresses those aspects of his early life that have been, and continue to be, most unsettling to him as an adult writer. In fact, considering that the uncanny is concerned with "what excites fear in general" (U, 219), it indeed seems oddly appropriate that Thomas addresses this concept immediately in the very first line, in asking: "Man is a prolific being; he has covered the face of the earth. Why fear barrenness, then?" (A, 27) This seems to be one of the unanswered questions that 'haunts' the text; why does R.S. Thomas fear annihilation and insignificance? Why should the terrifying, unfamiliar concept of 'barrenness' be addressed at all in the seemingly regenerative literary form of 'autobiography' whose very purpose is to record one's life so that it may achieve a certain immortality? Even as a child, Thomas seems to have been plagued consistently by some worry or other, fearing the sudden collapse of the world around him. While it can be argued that most children are fearful of the incomprehensible adult world that surrounds them, it must also be taken into account that these are details Thomas *chooses* to share with his audience from his adult viewpoint, thus suggesting their continuing hold on him. He remembers with precision such incidents such as "There was a door and a small child playing near it. . . . An arm was broken." Doctors are recalled as grotesque bullies rather than comforting figures: "nasty men who would push a spoon down the throat. The child would hide behind the curtains" (A, 27). "Fear" and "terror" are words that appear constantly. In encountering

cockroaches in his father's cabin, Thomas is not only plagued by fright, but of a feeling of aloneness, in not being able successfully to communicate the horrific feeling to those around him: "How can a child make adults understand the full terror of cockroaches?" (A, 28). Thomas's childhood world seems to him enclosed, cut adrift from others: "It was in this way that fear became part of his experience," (A, 27) he recalls.

The notion of "dread and horror" is also characteristic of his later autobiographical work, The Echoes Return Slow (1988). This work further blurs the distinction between autobiography and fiction, for it is arranged as alternating short passages of prose and poetry that 'reflect' each other on opposite pages. While it belongs stylistically to the discourse of the literary, the work is also interesting as an autobiographical text, whose intimations of the uncanny are as powerful as they are in Neb. In this text, his childhood is again imbued with terror and insecurity, and the image of cockroaches, coupled with the fear of loneliness, remains a potent force in the poet's memory. Again, the very fact that the cockroaches reappear in this later text seem to point towards the 'compulsion to repeat' that is characteristic of the uncanny. Here is an image in Thomas's mind "which ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light" (U, 241), for it ultimately reflects his sense of aloneness:

I lay in a bunk while they feasted, turning and turning the  
glossed pages. The cockroaches should have been a  
reminder. The shadows from which they crawled were as  
dark as those where the submarines lurked. (ERS, 6)

Implicit here is the fact that terror or insecurity is somehow conditioned by his upbringing. There is fear, a certain sense of the uncanny, in not being able to comprehend

those “dark shadows” from which the alien creatures appear, and that these indecipherable, unfathomable corners are somehow associated with the sea, “where the submarines lurked” (ERS, 6). Thomas has an ambivalent relationship with the sea throughout much of his writing, the cockroaches serving as “a reminder” that this is an alien life to him, the darker edge of the natural world. The cockroaches appear as a kind of perversion of the natural world and the natural order that he usually finds comforting. The boy’s fear and loneliness are, manifestly, intensified in the fact that he is not tucked up in bed, ‘at home’ with his parents, in the familiar domestic routine, but rather alone in foreign surroundings, his parents “far away, enjoying themselves” (A, 27).

The Echoes Return Slow also outlines Thomas’s coming-into-being, reflected in his horrific dramatisation of his own birth. In recalling the event, Thomas sees the birth as something scatological and base; it is within “Pain’s climate” that he is born, viewing himself as “trash that had accumulated nine months in the man’s absence” (ERS, 2). The vision prevails, for “The marks in the spirit would not heal” and the “dream would recur, groping his way up to the light, coming to the crack too narrow to squeeze through” (ERS, 2). This horrific image manifests the fear that is still present as Thomas recounts his coming into existence, and once again points towards the significance of repetition, the uncanny moment present in the notion of the recurring dream. He imagines himself not as having an easy, willing birth, but of being inadequate, struggling alone into the world. Once born, Thomas recollects a terrifying passivity. He is “shone on / through tears,” and he notes how he “screamed / at the ineffectuality / of love to protect me” (ERS, 3). Most significantly, he sees his birth as “A dislocation of mind: / love photographed / the imbecility of my expression and framed it” (ERS, 5). The word

'dislocation' seems to be a key word for Thomas's vision of his childhood, for it is ultimately as a result of his childhood and his upbringing, Anglicised and bourgeois, that he becomes dislocated within adulthood. Dislocation, becoming displaced from others, and from oneself, is again, a manifestation of the realm of the uncanny, which involves "uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced" (U, 241). In his "Autobiographical Essay," in yet again recalling the incident of the broken arm, Thomas asks "why shouldn't one remember a dislocation?"<sup>60</sup> and once again highlights the root of his insecurity, a feeling of a violent displacement from the natural order – a feeling that his life, and identity, were somehow out-of-place, just like his dislocated bone.

It is also important to note that The Echoes Return Slow communicates an altogether different sense of R.S. Thomas's life than that which is offered by the discursive, more conventional prose. Its form being both fragmentary and fluid, it thus relates a sense of self that is in flux/unfixed, allowing the reader a glimpse of the uncanny experience Thomas has *of himself*, translating himself into text only to become lost within it. Barbara Prys-Williams, in her essay "Some Aspects of R.S. Thomas's *The Echoes Return Slow* as Autobiography," highlights the necessity of critiquing this text as autobiography. She argues that this is a text "that enables Thomas to explore fully his own sense of self, partly through allowing privileged access to the unconscious (and image-producing) part of his psyche."<sup>61</sup> The suggestion that one is somehow able to gain

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<sup>60</sup> William V. Davis ed. Miraculous Simplicity (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993) I. Further references will be given parenthetically in the text (MS).

<sup>61</sup> Barbara Prys-Williams, "A consciousness in quest of its own truth: Some Aspects of R.S. Thomas's *Echoes Return Slow* as Autobiography" *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays* 2 (1996): 98.

“privileged access” to Thomas’s unconscious is again a reminder that one aspect of the uncanny is that which “ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light.”<sup>62</sup> *The Echoes Return Slow*, in this sense, can be read as a kind of ‘double’ of *Neb*, as a text that draws out the previously covert and hidden, that contains the ‘slippage’ of Thomas’s autobiographical writing.

Prys-Williams also suggests that there may be a case for arguing that the form brings to light a reinforced identity. She argues that the text demonstrates:

instances of ways in which a writer’s weak sense of self has been strengthened through the very act of writing, both autobiographically and imaginatively.<sup>63</sup>

Prys-Williams argues that, through metaphor, Thomas is able to construct and consolidate a sense of self that is altogether different from other, more linear and ‘direct’ texts. “Metaphor would seem to be the ultimate means of perceiving, and of exploring what we perceive,”<sup>64</sup> she writes, suggesting that the text becomes a kind of ongoing process of construction and interpretation, as its title perhaps suggests. It is Prys-Williams’s belief that “In the potent image-making of *The Echoes Return Slow*, we feel that Thomas is very fully in touch with total psychic life in a way that he cannot be in the more discursive *Neb*.”<sup>65</sup> Again, one is reminded that the uncanny also deals with

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<sup>62</sup> U, 225. Originally a passage from Schelling: “According to him,” writes Freud, “everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light.”

<sup>63</sup> Prys-Williams 99.

<sup>64</sup> Prys-Williams 102.

<sup>65</sup> Prys-Williams 102.



something “repressed which *recurs*” (U, 241), The Echoes Return Slow, in this sense, offering insight into the world of Thomas’s unconscious.

Prys-Williams thus urges critics to look beyond the seeming elusiveness of The Echoes Return Slow, to renounce the notion that “it is a difficult, cryptic work,”<sup>66</sup> in order to get at the root of its suggestions concerning the poet’s identity. She reminds the reader that “Present needs...influence the way in which we retrieve, reconstruct and interpret memory,”<sup>67</sup> and she encourages critics to view this particular text as a manifestation of Thomas’s complexities of identity at a particular moment in time. In arguing that it is far more revelatory than is often acknowledged, she writes:

Appearing fragmentary as the story of a life, the text, in its very discontinuity, gives an appropriate feeling of Thomas’s lack of any real, linear, discursive self held together by an achieved centre of being. Thomas seems, much more, a fleetingly intuited self expressed through metaphor. The dynamic interaction of prose and poetry on facing pages, and the indeterminacy of polysemantic words (where several meanings exist in a single word) produce a “shimmer” effect remarkably appropriate for suggesting a nebulous sense of self.<sup>68</sup>

What Barbara Prys-Williams seems here to suggest is that the very act of reading this text is somehow uncanny, for it displaces the reader, the reader becomes ‘unsure’ of what is

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<sup>66</sup> Prys-Williams 98.

<sup>67</sup> Prys-Williams 114.

being presented. The indeterminacy becomes symbolic of Thomas's relationship with himself. Prys-Williams suggests: "We come to appreciate Thomas's habitual ways of perceiving and understanding. . . . Given pertinacity in the reader, *The Echoes Return Slow* can be seen to be autobiography of the most searching sort."<sup>69</sup> It is therefore autobiographical in so far as it contains a truth that must be actively 'sought.' It is an ambivalent account of one's life that parallels the double meaning of *heimlich* and, as Freud states: "on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight" (U, 224-5). *The Echoes Return Slow* is, in many ways, the point at which these conflicting meanings converge, and the reader is able to glean something of Thomas's 'familiar' and yet 'unfamiliar' world.

Not only is Thomas's memory of his childhood littered by moments of fear, but it is evident that here again he finds the idea of his own conception and birth as somehow repellent and distasteful. It is he - 'him-self' - who incites the greatest sense of dread and horror. The images are, once more, perversions of the natural order. "Blood rather than rain fell" (ERS, 2), Thomas writes of the birth, suggesting a perversion of nature. It is uncanny in the sense that it is an inevitable part of Thomas's life, inherently familiar to him, and yet at the same time Thomas establishes a distance and unfamiliarity from the event. It is inexorably bound, once again, to his sense of identity. "I have no name," he writes, commenting once again on his birth, and yet it is implicit that Thomas speaks from his own present viewpoint, his identity equally transitory and insecure. This can be said to be true of all such autobiographical passages, for Thomas is, in fact, relating to the

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<sup>68</sup> Prys-Williams 99.

present condition, through a consideration of the past. His sentiment towards his birth and conception ultimately express the way in which Thomas continues to view himself.

In Autobiographies, he goes on to relate how fear inhabited his childhood imagination. He recalls how “Princes and princesses became part of his imagination, along with dragons and giants.” It is, however the unnatural and terrifying creatures that recur in his dreams, which produce the most violent reactions: “One night when he was older, a gorilla came into his bedroom. As it came through the door the boy jumped out of bed, screaming. His parents found him on the floor.” (A, 28) Again, this serves as a reminder that Thomas was a child of a particularly nervous disposition, one susceptible enough to the disorientating *unheimlich* aspects of the surrounding world, who, even as an adult, can recall such incidents with precision and clarity.

The uncanny inhabits Thomas’s world once more in the rather humorous passage in which a fly goes up Thomas nose: “A little black fly got into his nose, almost into his brain! He was frightened through and through and ran screaming to look for his mother” (A, 28). While it is an absurd image, there is no doubt that it represents something altogether more terrifying for Thomas at the time. Nature was the one thing that Thomas indeed *did* feel an affinity with as a child, and in relation to which can claim “he was on the whole a happy boy. . . . It was the countryside that made him so” (A, 31). Like the cockroaches, the fly seemed to be a perversion of aesthetic beauty, the very aesthetic beauty Thomas identified with comfort and familiarity, and to discover that this also could arouse “dread and horror” proved extremely unsettling. In Autobiographies, he comments that “the experience remains in the memory to this day, and it is always with

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<sup>69</sup> Prys-Williams 123.

trepidation that I smell a flower” (A, 3). It is perhaps as a direct result of this that Thomas appears wary, in a later incident, of the dangers inherent in nature, destroying, rather than complementing, a day out for the young Thomas: “wasps would come after the cakes and try to settle on his hands. The others took no notice of them, but the wasps succeeded in ruining the pleasure of the afternoon for the nervous boy” (A, 29). Nature is thus also occasionally *unheimlich* for Thomas, the memory of such an ordinary family event transformed into a disturbing image that incurs the fear of pain and contamination. As Barbara Prys-Williams suggests, these instances are ultimately an echo of the way Thomas sees himself: “for Thomas, surges of self-loathing erupt to blight the loveliest day and seem to be firmly part of what continuing sense of self he has.”<sup>70</sup>

It is possible to imply that Thomas’s loneliness is in many ways a precondition for his uncanny experiences. One night, for example, Thomas is left on his own by his parents in the house, and despite his insisting that he will be ‘fine,’ he experiences a series of disorientating and haunting ‘terrors’:

After they had gone, silence would take possession of the house. Slowly, he would realise that he was on his own. And yet, was he? A house is not a dead thing. It is given to sighing, squeaking and whispering. He would listen. Wasn’t there someone upstairs? What was that noise, as of a man breathing? He would go to the bottom of the stairs and turn on the light. And yet the far end of upstairs was in shadow. He would shout. No answer. He would climb the

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<sup>70</sup> Prys-Williams 101.

stairs, step by step, and having reached the top he would listen again. Suddenly he would leap forward a step or two, thundering with his feet and shouting 'Boo!' Nothing. No-one. He would come downstairs with some relief, and begin reading again in front of the fire until his parents came home. (A, 31)

Thomas's assertion that "A house is not a dead thing" reflects the concern with animism that is another feature of the uncanny. Thomas's 'home' has become here the coldly displaced 'house' and yet, while it is seemingly inanimate, Thomas realises with sudden terror that it has a life of its own. At the same time, this makes Thomas even more aware of his own identity, his own claim to the house, and there seems a bizarre attempt here on his behalf to 'drive out' the threatening force within the house by enforcing his own presence. As "silence would take possession," Thomas finds himself dispossessed in his own home. The home becomes house, it has become *suddenly* strange and frightening and alien. Through the act of climbing the stairs, turning on the light, sounding his own voice, he is desperately trying to reaffirm himself and render *familiar* that which has suddenly presented itself as terrifying. Even the act described in a subsequent passage of making the effigy and placing it at the head of the stairs links directly to Thomas's sense of insecurity, and can be seen as a kind of doubling of Thomas himself, a mode of preserving his own identity within the house. As Thomas himself admits: "A man's personality is a strange thing. It reveals itself in mysterious ways" (A, 31).

Such experiences of fear and unreality, however, are not confined merely to Thomas's childhood. Similar experiences of estrangement and alienation are apparent in

the transition from childhood into adulthood, during his student years at the then University College of North Wales, Bangor, and later at Llandaff Theological College, in Cardiff. While in childhood, he was disturbed by being left alone, he becomes increasingly unsettled in adulthood by the notion of being among others, again for the reason that one's identity comes into sharper focus; one can be *with* others though at the same time not feel at home as part of the group. He often refers to his new adult life as 'unreal,' stating that "he didn't know who he was" (A, 3), and that "being a nonentity, I was unnoticed" (MS, 3). Even as he attempted to integrate, Thomas felt that it was somehow unnatural for him to do so, writing that "there was something unreal about his attempts to take part in college activities." (A, 38) Thomas portrays himself as playing the role of the detached spectator, unable to engage fully with the social life of the college because once again he felt dislocated, out-of-place. There is a sense also in which Thomas attempted to distance himself, quite literally, from activities, in order to heighten the element of unreality, to *consciously* further his own estrangement. He would "sometimes during a merry dance. . . . go outside and look through the windows at the merry crowd inside, and see it all as something completely unreal" (A, 38). Thomas thus consciously places himself at the margins, feeling himself somehow to be naturally, as if by instinct, already 'outside' the experience. Again, the dichotomy between reality and unreality becomes indicative of the uncanny, the question of whether or not the life one leads is 'real,' and what subsequently one's role is within that 'unreal' life.

Arguably, this is an experience that many people undergo as they make the transition from childhood to adulthood; the longing, as Thomas has it, "to forget the black gown he wore was a kind of mourning for his dewy boyhood" (A, 14). However, it can

be argued that here the unease was more acute than mere homesickness. As Freud asserts: “Something has to be added to what is novel and unfamiliar in order to make it uncanny” (U, 221). That ‘something,’ in Thomas’s case, it can be suggested, is very much to do with the fact that this was a world very much chosen *for* him, a life he found difficult to believe was actually his ‘own’. In Autobiographies he finds himself wondering “Who put it into his head to be a candidate for Holy Orders? He wasn’t by any means a regular worshipper in church” (A, 34); looking back, he sees himself to have been steered along a path, rather than to have made his own decisions in life. The main impulse determining his path is his strong-willed mother who, as a result of his father’s frequent absence at sea, became a dominant influence in his early life:

When she saw that her son had no strong objection to the idea of being a candidate for Holy Orders she secretly rejoiced and persuaded her husband to agree to the idea. And the son accepted that he would have to start learning Greek and go on to university, and because Bangor was the closest one, that it was there that he would go. All this was quite clear and definite. (A, 35)

In the sentence “the son accepted” Thomas once again registers his subjection and passivity, a strange feeling of displacement from his life, a life primarily governed by others. There is indeed the suggestion, in his “Autobiographical Essay,” that his temperament was somehow to blame for the fact that he did not resist being ‘sent’ to theological college; “Shy as I was,” writes Thomas, “I offered no resistance.” (MS, 3)

This results, later, in an acute questioning of his own identity, as man and as priest. In the poem 'Roles,' he asks:

How old was he, when he asked  
 who he was, and receiving  
 no answer, asked who they  
 were, who projected images  
 of themselves on an unwilling  
 audience. (CP, 485)

He sees his life as having been one constructed by others, a life that subsequently becomes alien – uncanny- to him, familiar and yet unreal. Again, this is attributed to his Anglican mother. 'Roles' concludes with Thomas looking in "his mirror for re-assurance / that he is still there, challenging the eyes / to look back into his own and not / at the third person over his shoulder" (CP, 485). Here Thomas manifests a certain fear in trying to secure his identity as his 'own,' not as that ascribed to him by his mother – and the realisation lurks here that it is *he* who must confirm his existence, rather than his mother.

This also utilises one of Thomas's main recurring motifs, that of the 'problem' posed by his own reflection. Again, this is ultimately an uncanny image, for there is something extremely strange in concentrating on one's reflection in a mirror, and attempting to equate what one sees before one as belonging to a sense of 'self' or identity. Ultimately, Thomas finds that he does not get any kind of guarantee or confirmation from his own reflection, for he cannot confront his own image; ultimately what he sees staring back at him is the image of several others, and predominantly, his mother. Consequently, his own sense of self is underdeveloped. As Barbara Prys-Williams explores this issue, she draws on the work of the psychotherapist Alice Miller, whose description of the identity-less child Prys-Williams sees as particularly relevant to the way in which Thomas was denied a sense of 'self' through his parentage. Miller



writes of such children that “they seemed to have developed scarcely any feeling of self,”<sup>71</sup> and that this is a result of the behaviour of parents “who did not regard their child as an autonomous person but entirely in relation to the gratification of their own needs.”<sup>72</sup> Barbara Prys-Williams goes on to conclude therefore, that, for Thomas, “Any possibility of identity had to lie in being separate from his mother.”<sup>73</sup>

Any discussion of Thomas and mirrors, and especially from the viewpoint of its maternal dimension, must take into account Katie Gramich’s article “Mirror Games: Self and M(O)ther in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas,” in which Gramich, without explicitly naming the uncanny, does indeed refer to the very act of ‘mirroring’ within the poetry of R.S. Thomas as possessing an uncanny dimension, one that she later goes on to attribute to the poet’s relationship with his mother. She states:

As the self gazes at its reflection, it appears to recognize itself, and yet the recognition is actually a misrecognition, since the image is not actually the self, but a strange, other entity. Thus, the reflection tends to convey feelings of alienation and solitude, rather than of solace and reassurance.<sup>74</sup>

As is evident here, Thomas’s relationship with his reflection is seen as uncanny, and complex; it is, in Gramich’s words, “that uneasy combination of strangeness and

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<sup>71</sup> Prys-Williams 106.

<sup>72</sup> Prys-Williams 106.

<sup>73</sup> Prys-Williams 113.

<sup>74</sup> Katie Gramich, “Mirror Games: Self and M(O)ther in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas,” Echoes to the Amen, Ed. Damian Walford Davies (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003) 132.

familiarity.”<sup>75</sup> In the same way, Gramich argues that the mirror becomes an unsettling experience for Thomas as it is a reminder of his mother’s control over his identity. His mother becomes a strange, ambivalent presence in the mirror, as Thomas is caught in feelings of an ambivalent nature. On the one hand, desperate to return to his mother, and re-embrace the security of infancy, and yet, at the same time, longing to be free, to become his own person, to be able to engage in the adult world.

In recalling his mother’s determination and control, Thomas seems to have become acutely aware of the source of his confused, indistinct identity. He seeks to comprehend his ‘chosen’ path:

No muscle. All legs. His cleverness was in running away.  
He came to, miles from home, among others who had  
arrived also, but for their own reasons, wiser than his.  
Young men and women with one foot on the ladder,  
confident because of their head for heights that life was a  
thing meant to be climbed. He studied, he danced. He was  
half prepared for everything but life. (ERS, 12)

He contrasts his own experience of university with that of others around him, and presumes that they had made their own choices, their reasons “wiser than his” (ERS, 12). “He studied, he danced,” writes Thomas, implying that he is rather ‘going through the motions’ and thus becoming distanced, feeling himself ill-equipped to engage in life itself.

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<sup>75</sup> Gramich 132.

The performative aspect of theological training seems to have intensified his sense of displacement. The necessity to perform as an individual, in front of others, was something Thomas had never before contemplated. This added to his sense of unease; for the necessity to perform, to act as priest in front of a congregation, made Thomas all the more self-conscious. It is a task that Thomas found almost impossible, for he could not equate this with a sense of identity, only with fear and dissolution:

In a dissolving  
World what certainties  
For the self, whose identity  
Is its performance? (ERS, 33)

The specific roles he was to play at the altar foregrounds for Thomas the essentially performative nature of adult life. He relates how “everyone was expected to take services somewhere in the surrounding area in order to gain experience, but mercifully this was not compulsory, and so, with his usual cowardice, the boy succeeded in avoiding this” (A, 42). In that “usual” one hears the characteristic self-deprecatory tone of R.S. Thomas. This is a world in which seemingly everyone else is at ease, and yet he cannot bring himself to engage in such tasks.

During his time at Bangor, Thomas was also confronted, seemingly for the first time, with issues of linguistic national identity. Although these did not cause tension at the time, such experiences certainly seem to have made him aware of a certain divide, and of himself as belonging primarily to English culture and language:

In the refectory there were two tables, one for the English  
students and the other for the Welsh. The boy would sit  
with the English students, as English was his language. But  
sometimes he would be drawn to sit at the other table. One

or two of them would try to get him to say words like 'llwy', 'spoon' and then burst out laughing because of his patois. . . . [u]nfortunately, the boy did not feel any desire to learn it. His background overpowered him, and he tended to be drawn to English-speaking friends and girls.

(A, 40)

This passage manifests the acute irony of hindsight. Thomas carefully and explicitly attributes his linguistic identity to his 'overpowering' background: in retrospect he stresses that this was not a *chosen* identity, any more than his vocation had been his choice. Although one needs to be aware of the retrospective perspective of Thomas's account, one does need to register the fact of his being somehow attracted, even at this early stage, towards the Welsh 'other.' Thomas's assertion that "sometimes he would be drawn" to the Welsh table, suggests a desire to become removed from the stable, fixed, 'automatic' identity he feels has been ascribed to him, a desire to make a connection with something outside that identity, even at the expense of derision. Again, this can be read in terms of the uncanny. Thomas is aware of his 'proper' home, and yet something draws him to another identity, a 'something' already present in himself, a desire to break away from the identity imposed upon him by his mother, his home, and his upbringing.

It is not surprising, therefore, considering his unease and sense of unhomeliness in Bangor and Llandaff, that the countryside of Anglesey came to symbolise, in many ways, the 'other' for Thomas, the homely, the familiar, the canny. This life became representative of the ideal, presenting also a kind of unity of being that he sought to achieve within adulthood. Despite the fact that his boyhood recollections are also full of

examples of uncanny unease and dissolution, he also subsequently romanticises his childhood in order perhaps to escape imaginatively from his adult life: “he was on the whole a happy boy. At least that is what he told himself after reaching adulthood” (A, 31). Childhood becomes representative of the ideal, the ‘pure’ identity, and this was magnified further by the fact that Thomas could see Anglesey from his bedroom window at university: “the boy was left to spend his first night away from home in lodgings that overlooked the river Menai towards Anglesey” (A, 36). Again, one feels as though Thomas is plagued by a sense of loss and longing that is more acute than mere homesickness. He can *see* his ‘own’ home from his new / strange home, and is thus haunted by a continual physical reminder of his home as being ‘elsewhere.’ This, however, does not merely allude to Holyhead, but to a feeling that his home, where he belongs, is something for which he is still searching.

A distinction needs to be made between Thomas’s relationship with Anglesey as a spiritual home, a place where he is able to feel rooted, and his feelings towards his literal, domestic home. On the one hand, Anglesey developed into a symbol of organic identity that enabled Thomas to set himself apart from the alien college environment. On the other hand, however, the domestic space was one from which he was eager to escape. Thomas was attempting to return to his spiritual home, while also being eager to move away from the cultural values represented in the literal ‘home,’ thus separating the two.

Anglesey, a stark contrast to the ‘unreal’ and yet ‘worldly’ college society, became a focus of great *hiraeth* for Thomas. *Hiraeth*, perhaps not unlike the term *unheimlich*, is uncanny in itself, for it is a Welsh term popularly believed to be without adequate English translation, the closest interpretations being those of “longing,” “grief

or sadness after the lost or departed,” “yearning,” “nostalgia,” “earnest desire,” “wistfulness,” and most significantly, in this context at least, “homesickness.”<sup>76</sup> It is synonymous not only with notions of romantic memory and poignant loss, but also with painful yearning for something beyond reach. During his undergraduate years, Thomas began taking an interest in poetry, specifically Georgian poetry, and found in its emotive, lyrical and often sentimental style an escapist poetic model that he was able to imitate in order to express this *hiraeth*. In 1934 Thomas began to publish work in *Omnibus*, the student magazine, and adopted what he himself refers to as the “laughably literary pseudonym” (A, 38) of Curtis Langdon, enabling him, for the first time, to adopt a ‘persona’ through which he felt able to explore these tensions between authentic/imposed identity. It is tempting to view his emergence into the world of poetry as Thomas asserting a degree of control over his life, making his own choices, and yet the very pseudonym he adopts he later attributes, once again, to his mother’s influence.<sup>77</sup> Georgianism, after all, can be considered essentially English and bourgeois, and while it served Thomas’s purpose during his undergraduate years, it also marked the fact that his identity was indistinct, and that he himself, in being initially content to imitate, as would any young poet, was searching for a direction.

A great many of Thomas’s earliest lyrics seem to have been influenced by the Georgian poets, and it is perhaps worth considering some of the main tenets of this movement in order to determine why Thomas felt such a movement to be worthy of imitation. As Robert H. Ross notes in his study The Georgian Revolt: rise and fall of a

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<sup>76</sup> R.J. Thomas and Gareth A. Bevan, eds., Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru, Rhan XXIX (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1979) 1870.

poetic ideal 1910-1922, Georgianism marked a renewal of readership in poetry, and can be viewed in terms of a literary renaissance:

The public's interest in poetry, long dormant, was beginning to awaken. More important, the nature of poetry itself was undergoing drastic changes; a new, twentieth century poetic was being created.<sup>78</sup>

Georgianism marked therefore an emergence of a new school of writers, appealing to a wide audience, whose style deviated from the rather staid expression of Victorian literature. The very title of the Georgian Poetry collections published between 1912 and 1922 indicates their up-to-dateness, their belonging to the contemporary era of George V. As Roberts remarks of the period:

the Victorians had strayed too far from life as the proper subject matter for poetry. In the new twentieth century, poetry must either perish as anachronism or return wholeheartedly to strength and truth to life as it is lived. Poetry of the study may go.<sup>79</sup>

Georgian poetry was viewed as poetry preoccupied with reflecting 'real life', a poetry of animation whose roots were non-academic, that was able in some way to resemble truth and authenticity, for as Roberts declares, "the young Georgian poets hoisted the banner of poetic sincerity."<sup>80</sup> Such poetry also demanded a language that was at once accessible and

<sup>77</sup> A point developed later in Chapter 2.

<sup>78</sup> Robert H. Ross, The Georgian Revolt: rise and fall of a poetic ideal (London: Faber, 1965) 36.

<sup>79</sup> Ross 44.

<sup>80</sup> Ross 44.

simple, while also emotive and challenging. The ultimate focus was on direct communication with its audience, and of reaching ‘the people.’ As David Perkins writes in A History of Modern Poetry:

the pleasures of Georgian poetry include especially an easy, natural speech, a close, appreciative rendering of suburban and rural existence, charm of personality – the tender, sympathetic, yet humorous speaker – and an outward unpretentiousness with inner subtlety.<sup>81</sup>

Once more, the emphasis is placed on its poetic directness, the ability to communicate poetically without pretence or verbosity. These attributes, while registering a departure from the Victorian era, are also suggestive of the contrasting qualities of Modernism, whose values were against “such values as clarity, realism, empirical honesty and rationalism,”<sup>82</sup> maintained by the Georgian poets.

However, “Georgianism” rapidly became something of a pejorative term, when it was compared to the cosmopolitan experimentalism of Modernism; the Georgians were seen as standing, according to John Press, “accused of a narrow English provincialism, and of indifference to both the wider culture of Europe and the social realities of their time.”<sup>83</sup> However, especially in the eyes of a poetically unsophisticated, undergraduate reader like Thomas, another facet of Georgian poetry could be found appealing, namely the idea of the poet as a person of particular awareness and sensitivity in an

<sup>81</sup> David Perkins, A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After (Boston: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987) 251.

<sup>82</sup> Perkins 349.

<sup>83</sup> John Press, Map of Modern English Verse 108.



unsympathetic, unpoetic world. The Georgian poet was one whose poetic vision was fuelled by idealism, and whose introspective vision was consciously that of the recluse, or at least the man standing apart. It was also indisputably a rural vision, focussing on the country as retreat, and of the pastoral as possessing spiritual superiority.

Considering this definition of the movement, it is perhaps easy to see how this particular literary movement became a model for Thomas during his early, impressionable stages as a poet and also, in another sense, how Thomas was able to 'belong' in a literary sense, to counteract those uncanny feelings. Poetry, in itself, was 'other' to Thomas at this time, unfamiliar territory, a place that ultimately allowed him an opportunity to explore his own underdeveloped identity. In the poem "The Bend," for example, published in *Omnibus* in 1934, the poet uses a seemingly simplistic, rural metaphor, which nevertheless succeeds in revealing something of his own fear of adulthood and conventional adult expectations. The poem begins with the poet describing how, as a child, he would watch a stream flowing by his house; the stream is thus identified with the natural and at the same time the local, rooting his identity in a specific, familiar place:

Down the stream, a little way,  
There was a sudden bend,  
And oft I wondered what there lay  
Beyond, and hoped I'd see one day,  
Just for fun.<sup>84</sup>

Its lyrical, playful opening suggests a poem of rural simplicity, of child-like pleasures. "Just for fun" seems to recall Thomas's boyhood, celebrating the carefree period in which "the boy had little interest in books" (A, 35) and in which Thomas felt that his "days of

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<sup>84</sup> R.S. Thomas, "The Bend," *Omnibus* XLII. 2. (Summer 1934): 80.

his boyhood were without end" (A, 33). One is reminded here that the essence of Thomas's childhood was the surrounding natural world, the open air, and its unlimited freedom: "He would play, he would race, he would go to swim in the sea, to row a boat, to fish" (A, 33). But there is curiosity in the poem also, a desire for knowledge. In wanting to actively seek out "what there lay / Beyond," "Just for fun" he maintains the hope that what *does* lie beyond is a continuation, an enhancement of those pleasures already experienced. In moving 'beyond,' however, the poem loses its frivolous, child-like curiosity, for to go beyond, to move into adulthood, creates an altogether darker image:

Now, looking back, I wish that I  
 Had never passed that bend,  
 For when I glided swiftly by,  
 All beauty seemed at once to die,  
 And part of me died too.<sup>85</sup>

In growing older, in becoming aware of his responsibility, his own individuality, Thomas, at least in this poem, feels that he is in some way losing himself, "part of me died" indicating not closure, but a certain dissolution of self. It is not merely that the world around him appears unfamiliar, but that the self is altered in entering the new and unfamiliar, that self is curiously no longer the 'fully authentic' self.

While this poem, in its methodical structure and accessible, simple language, seems to answer many of the prerequisites of Georgian verse, there is also here an undercurrent that imbues the poetry with an altogether more unsettling feel. One is reminded here once again of Prys-Williams's claim that The Echoes Return Slow acts as a kind of 'unconscious' voice, for Thomas expresses with the later sequence a sentiment

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similar to the one expressed in “The Bend.” He again uses the image of the stream to represent the transformation from childhood into adulthood: “He tried infecting the whiteness of the moon-lighted stream with the seriousness of his shadow” (ERS, 14). As in “The Bend” the stream becomes representative of the natural world of his boyhood that has in itself become an ideal, a fluid, multifarious, unconfined space that represents beauty and purity – the *known*, recognisable natural world. But it is a space Thomas can no longer penetrate, or comprehend; this world has become strangely, uncannily unfamiliar to him, and he himself is no longer relevant. The stream becomes ‘infected’ by his shadow, and he himself has become contaminated so that he cannot enter the world previously open to him.

While this early poem is, undoubtedly, a poem of nostalgia, of *hiraeth*, it can also be suggested that those feelings of displacement manifest not merely the desire to return to childhood, but the sudden, and frightful, awareness of himself as somehow a *partial* presence, an identity that is somehow incomplete. Increasingly Thomas feels as though the world around him is ‘unreal,’ and becomes plagued by an acute sense of displacement and loss. Once more, he must ask, who is he? It is once more a poem that causes an uncanny effect, and gives the impression of R.S. Thomas as somehow passive and inanimate in attempting to engage in adult life.

Having left St. Michael’s College, Llandaff in 1936, Thomas became a curate in the parish of Chirk, Denbighshire, on the English border. Eager to leave Llandaff, he was permitted leave before he had passed his last set of examinations, becoming a curate at the age of twenty-three. Once again, it was not entirely his own decision. The sub-warden of the college is noted as stating his preference for Thomas to accept a post at Chirk, over

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<sup>85</sup> Thomas “The Bend,” 80.

another 'unsuitable' parish in Rhosymedre. Thomas relates the event with characteristic passivity: "I would rather see you go to the parish of Chirk,' he said. And so it transpired" (A, 42). This was the point for Thomas at which "adult life began. I had to preach sermons, which I had shirked doing until then" (MS, 5). His identity was once more called into question as he was again confronted with the performative aspects of his training that had previously terrified him.

His initial enthusiasm for the 'novel' aspect of the post ("In the excitement of the new life opening up before him, the boy forgot about Holyhead and the sea for the time being," A, 42) was predictably dissipated by an overwhelming sense of *hiraeth*. Now, it would seem, Thomas was further than ever from his 'home,' and from the ideal. He relates how:

within three weeks the weather turned around, and there came the mist and the rain and the cold that were fairly common along the Welsh border, and the young man realising with terrible suddenness where he was. It was in this way that the *hiraeth* for Anglesey and the sea began, a *hiraeth* that would influence him throughout the years to come. (A, 43)

This notion of 'terrible suddenness' is again symptomatic of the uncanny, the notion that one's surroundings are suddenly questionable, as one becomes aware of a haunting unfamiliarity in them. It would seem that Thomas was 'not-at-home' in Chirk any more than he had been in Bangor or Llandaff, and the feeling of 'lack' within his own identity intensified. His poem "Hiraeth," collected in The Stones of the Field, and still very much

in the mould of the Georgian period, can be considered as an attempt to explore the 'truth' of his predicament. The poem is related from the viewpoint of the young Thomas who finds himself displaced both geographically and emotionally:

My dark thought upon that day  
That brought me from Arfon's bay,  
From the low shores of Malldraeth and its sand,  
Far inland, far inland. (SF, 34)

There is tension in being "far inland," to be physically, painfully removed from one's 'home,' and to be "far inland" also contrasts dramatically with images of island shorelines, whose spaces are open, continuously close to the energy of the sea. His *hiraeth* becomes a desire for location, a pressing urge for identification, the images of Anglesey representing both a place and a state of being. From the bleakness of his present exile, what is referred to as his "leafless house" (a house, not a home, bare and leafless compared to the vitality of Anglesey), he realises that that other life still exists, though for him it is unobtainable:

But there Caergybi, Aberffraw  
And holy Llanddwyn are wearing now  
Like the rich cloak of old royalty  
The wild purple of the sea. (SF, 34)

The "rich"-ness of the colour of Anglesey contrasts strikingly with his "dark thought" from a place the frost and rain have "picked clean". The farther removed Thomas comes from the landscapes and shores of his boyhood haunts, the more they come to symbolise hope and regeneration, constructed indeed with something of the depth and emotion with which he was later to express his ideals visions of the "true Wales of my imagination."  
(A, 10)

Such poems intensify the notion of the ideal, and it becomes evident that there is also a need to inscribe this intense longing with a direction and purpose. It was while in Chirk that Thomas first began to associate his unhomeliness with a cultural cause. While a student at Llandaff, he had been mystified by Wales, but seemed not to have related its existence to his own anxieties of identity. In one of his long journeys home from Llandaff to Caergybi, Thomas seems to have been very aware of the two separate, co-existing entities:

To the west, therefore, there was a romantic, dangerous,  
mysterious land. But having reached home the thing would  
disappear from my mind for a while. At home there was an  
English-language life to be lived. (A, 10)

It is interesting that Thomas seems to have equated Wales at this time with a certain 'danger', and there is certainly, as in the early poetry, a sense of something 'other' that is ambiguously seductive, yet which does not constitute the actual life he was living. That evocation of the 'wild purple of the sea' again comes to mind, the desire to become passionately, wholeheartedly *involved* in his own life, rather than to remain an outsider. There is something peculiarly passive in his remark that "there was an English-language life to be lived" as if Thomas, in writing his autobiography, once again realises the automated role prescribed for him by his English, bourgeois background. In this sense, therefore, the 'danger' of Wales, in representing the 'other,' possibly presents to Thomas an active choice, as opposed to a mere role to be passively enacted. And yet, as is the case with the uncanny, that which aroused terror in him did so because it belonged to the "old and long familiar" countryside of his childhood in Anglesey. Like the Georgian

poetry of the period, its focus was on the return to simple, primitive pleasures, and towards an agrarian lifestyle.

As Thomas came under the influence of the Georgians, one Georgian poet in particular seemed to have influenced him: Edward Thomas. Edward Thomas, being of Welsh parentage, also seemed to have opened up for Thomas the possibility that feelings of displacement and of otherness could be linked to cultural identity, and that being somehow 'outside' one's instinctive, natural context could provide a poetic source. It also enabled R.S. Thomas to move away from the quintessentially English influence of Georgian poetry, for as John Press remarks, Georgianism often "felt an intuitive sympathy with the specifically English elements of English poetry rather than with its European aspects."<sup>86</sup> Edward Thomas, therefore, stood out for R.S. Thomas as a much-sought alternative to the likes of other Georgian poets, for his cultural context was different; he himself, perhaps, was prey to similar alienation. Certainly, it becomes evident, in R.S. Thomas's later introduction to his Selected Poems of Edward Thomas, that he chooses to view the older poet much in the same way that he views himself. "Yet one Welshman, at least" writes R.S. Thomas, "toys with the idea that the melancholy and dry whimsicality, the longing to make the glimpsed good place permanent, which appear in Thomas' verse, may have had a Welsh source."<sup>87</sup> There is a curious doubling, uncanny effect produced as one reads this introduction, and at times one becomes unsure whether R.S. Thomas is in fact referring to Edward Thomas, or himself. He talks of Thomas's

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<sup>86</sup> Press Map of Modern English Verse 106.

<sup>87</sup> R.S. Thomas, ed. Selected Poems of Edward Thomas (London: Faber, 1964) 11.

'true self'<sup>88</sup> as emergent in the country and notes that "His taste was for solitude, the quiet observation of birds, beasts and flowers, but salted always by chance conversations with the earthly inhabitants of the country through which he passed."<sup>89</sup> The two Thomases become further confused as Thomas writes, "At Abercuawg the cuckoos sing' – seem to have fascinated Thomas,"<sup>90</sup> and here one is reminded of the source of Thomas's later 1976 lecture 'Abercuawg.' And again, when R.S. Thomas writes "Somewhere beyond the borders of Thomas' mind, there was a world he never could quite come at,"<sup>91</sup> one again gets the feeling that he is at least in part talking about himself, inhabiting the uncanny realm of the double.

Edward Thomas may also have been appealing as he was not 'strictly' Georgian, in the sense that his work had not appeared in any of the Georgian anthologies, nor was he as unambiguously of the English middle classes as most of the other poets, and thus his poetry could be said to retain an individual identity of its own, a little apart from the Georgian mould. "His new prose rhythms and plain language offered a break-through from the dead end of Georgian verse, and still are a salutary corrective of florid or banal writing,"<sup>92</sup> writes R.S. Thomas, noting simultaneously his own awareness of the limitations of Georgian verse. Edward Thomas therefore represented something that, for Thomas, was superior to the usual style of Georgian poetry – a more direct, and more

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<sup>88</sup> Thomas 11.

<sup>89</sup> Thomas 12.

<sup>90</sup> Thomas 11.

<sup>91</sup> Thomas 11.

<sup>92</sup> Thomas 13.



honest writing that veered away from sentimentalism, “half-wry, half-melancholy.”<sup>93</sup> Edward Thomas thus offered an alternative model of Georgianism, and an ‘otherness’ in which the cultural and the literary converged.

As such a reading suggests, Thomas’s displacement had moved on to be an awareness of ‘otherness,’ and such a poet as Edward Thomas, whose work frequently expressed tones of longing and unfocussed restlessness, in fact suggested ways of giving voice to R.S. Thomas’s own feelings of separateness and a means of exploring them. It is unclear whether Thomas, even at this point, had imbued his anxiety with a particularly ‘Welsh’ source, but its beginnings can be seen in Chirk itself. In seeing “Y Berwyn rising against the sky . . . a thrill went through him” (A, 43), while Thomas notes also that “the old painful *hiraeth* would return, stronger than ever” (A, 43), though he seems as yet unable to make a connection between these sentiments. He yet lacks the realisation that a means of alleviating his *hiraeth*, and his experience of ‘unreality’, would be to engage in the cultural *reality* of Wales, or at least in “Wales” as he himself came to construct it.

As Thomas expanded his reading, he came into contact with writing that had a very different setting and vision of life to that of English bourgeois values, and that presented to him the exact same idealistic vision that sprang from his memory of his Anglesey life. The literature was mainly Irish and Scottish, and so he became influenced by the likes of Yeats, Synge, Austin Clarke, Fiona Macleod, Sorley Maclean and, of course, Hugh MacDiarmid, whose literary influence on, and parallels with, Thomas, will be discussed at length in Chapter 2. For Thomas, these writers represented “a land of common folk,” and “their ways traditionally Celtic” (A, 47-8). The notion of being

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<sup>93</sup> Thomas 13.

steeped in tradition marked a rooted-ness in these writers that was particularly appealing to the uprooted Thomas, and symbolised continuity, indigenous nature, as well as a simplicity of lifestyle, that assisted in moving him further and further away from feelings of alienation. Such writing offered him a sense of belonging that was *heimlich*, homely, and able to counter the uncanniness that he had long experienced. Through attempting to identify with Celtic writers, Thomas was able to renounce, temporarily, the unreality of his world, and to seek alternatives to the alienation that had previously pervaded his identity.

Thomas talks of his discovery of the Celtic poets in striking, enthusiastic terms: “In 1938 came the awakening” (A, 44). It is an ‘awakening’ in the sense that it succeeds in rousing something that is already present but dormant in Thomas during this period. The work of Fiona Macleod, for example, “echoed the hiraeth for the west that he was experiencing at the time” (A, 45), again indicating the notion that the work of the Celtic writers *happened* to relate to Thomas’s present sense of loss and displacement. And yet, even here, there is disillusion. It was certainly a measure of the impact of this writing, and perhaps of his own personal need to ‘belong, that Thomas visited the Hebrides to attempt to experience the culture for himself. However, reality, along with Hebridean rain, intruded, and Thomas remarks rather sulkily of the period that “he did not get one glimpse of Macleod’s magical land” (A, 47). Undeterred, he went on, while still a curate at Chirk, to visit Ireland, hoping to experience “the country of which Yeats had sung” (A, 47). In spite of the fact that he notes nothing less than having been “completely disillusioned” by Scotland, he is evidently determined to persevere. It is in Ireland, therefore, that Thomas first glimpses the *living* reality of the ideal:

The young man had noticed the number of carts that stood on the square in Galway, having come here with a load of seaweed, and as night began to fall, he was passed by cart after cart on its way home to the west. This, and the smell of peat in his nostrils, raised his spirits and filled him with new hope. This was the country of which Yeats had sung, a land of common folk, their language Irish and their ways traditionally Celtic. (A, 48)

The ideal, therefore, in coming to life before his eyes, legitimised his otherness, also providing him with the possibility of an alternative identity, non-English and non-bourgeois. The simplicity and spirituality with which he engaged through reading Celtic literature provided him with the hope that such a life might be possible in Wales. In another account, given in his “Autobiographical Essay,” he recalls the details of the “smell of peat heavy and sweet above me,” and also specifically the linguistic atmosphere, “the drivers calling out in Irish as they passed” (MS, 8) and later how “Everyone in the bus was speaking Irish.” (MS, 8) He is thus alerted to a linguistic dimension in his Celtic awakening.

Although he has certainly discovered by this time *what* he was looking for, the *why* of the cultural quest came much later. It was not until Thomas became a curate in Hanmer during the forties that his Welsh consciousness began to flourish – or at least, Thomas was able to identify his anxiety as symptomatic of a dislocation from Welsh identity. While his experience of Ireland seems to have heightened his awareness of the Celtic possibilities of his own lifestyle, his first, real awareness of it occurs in 1940, when

he attempts transfer his 'Celtic' sensibilities to a Welsh context. In 1940, Thomas married the artist Mildred Eldridge and, in organising the wedding, he sought to arrange a *neithior*, a traditionally Welsh wedding feast event reminiscent of the Celtic *ceilidh*, in which traditional Welsh music is performed for the guests. The attempt was, however, unsuccessful. It is only in hindsight that Thomas sees the episode as symptomatic of his lack of cultural 'knowledge', and later gleans from his friend, Welsh poet Euros Bowen, that such an event would indeed have been a possibility, had he been 'inside' the cultural context at the time, rather than being still an English-speaking outsider:

the owner was an Englishman and he did not succeed in getting hold of anyone, even though the curate had been told by Euros, when he came to know him, that there were plenty of harpists to be had in the surrounding area, if you only set about it in the right way. (A, 49)

Thomas sees that he himself was at odds with the culture of the time, desiring the *neithior* because it was representative of the ideal, and not the actuality, for such a specifically cultural detail did not reflect his own *living* reality at this time. This idea of having been 'told by Euros, when he came to know him' seems to be confirming that when Thomas became part of the Welsh-speaking collective, he was given access to information that would have otherwise been denied him as an English speaker. It certainly highlights a point at which Thomas's sense of having 'an English way of life to live' began to strike him as strangely uncomfortable. It is perhaps, as Royle states, an example of "something strange and unfamiliar arising in a familiar context" (Uncanny, 9) and that 'something' perhaps came to be the very language he spoke and through which he experienced life.

Thus calling into question, in a sense, Thomas's entire 'world,' a world, and a life, in which he was already feeling ill-at-ease.

The move to Hanmer proved equally unsettling. "Now Wales and her hills were further away than ever," writes Thomas, "and he would gaze hopelessly at them over miles of flat, uninteresting land"(A, 49). Again, his disappointment with the location's geographical blandness is telling, for Thomas often expresses his feelings of belonging in terms of his emotive response to highly visual, aesthetic characteristics. It is "the Berwyn rising against the sky," "the hills in the distance," that arouse in Thomas feelings of wonder and excitement, and such a contrast proves that something within him remains unfulfilled.

He was by now a married man, and this intensified sense of responsibility was further heightened by the fact that Thomas found himself confronting yet another alienating concept, that of war. Responses to the war gave rise to further feelings of alienation from his supposedly 'familiar' terrain of the Church, whose position on the crisis Thomas could not ignore. It must have been unsettling for Thomas, as a pacifist and curate, that the Church in whose name he preached was content merely to pray for those who had gone to war, rather than to actively preach *against* it. Again, Thomas found himself cut adrift from his own identity – his vocation, the very thing that gave him an identity during the crisis, was one in which he was unable to manifest his 'true' feelings. "Christ was a pacifist, but not so the Church established in his name." (A, 44)

The area of Thomas's 'war period' remains largely unexplored by critics, although M. Wynn Thomas in his study "R.S. Thomas: War Poet," draws attention to what he describes to Thomas's "wartime self," as seen in his first collection of poetry The

Stones of the Field (1946). Although Wynn Thomas's paper does not explicitly engage the discourse of the uncanny, it is implicit in his discussion that Thomas's world during this time was full of disorientation and alienation, and that Thomas experienced yet another 'crisis of self.' Wynn Thomas's description of the war poetry as possessing "a very suggestive trope for the unnatural . . . a reversal of the ordinary, proper direction of things,"<sup>94</sup> might be read as being a direct reference to the uncanny. The starkly visual poems of the period "bespeak a chaos in the mind, a sensibility under stress,"<sup>95</sup> and these poems, also, note a departure from the tranquillity of Georgianism to an altogether more violent, unflinching style. Wynn Thomas goes on to describe the many pressures facing Thomas in Hanmer in wartime, noting Thomas's vulnerability during the period of war. Of the collection Stones of the Field, Thomas writes: "obviously I don't mean that the collection directly addresses the subject of war. What I do mean is that the poetry frequently comes from an imagination fearfully alerted by war to the ferocities of existence."<sup>96</sup>

Pacifist beliefs thus gave way to added insecurity, as Thomas watched others marching off to war while "at the same time he noticed he wasn't showing enough confidence and fearlessness in the presence of the girl he had promised to look after" (A, 49). This comment marks another phase in Thomas's relation with the uncanny nature of the world. In Hanmer he is made all too aware of the fact that he is no longer only accountable for himself, but that he also has a duty towards others, towards his new wife

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<sup>94</sup> M. Wynn Thomas, R.S. Thomas: War Poet. (Cardiff: Arts Council of Wales, 1996) Text of the Ben Bowen Thomas Lecture delivered at Bodelwyddan Castle, Clwyd, 30/11/1996, 26.

<sup>95</sup> M. Wynn Thomas 23.

<sup>96</sup> M. Wynn Thomas 24.

in particular; an awareness that results in profound ambiguity towards his own behaviour. As Jean Paul Sartre suggests in his study Being and Nothingness, shame is often related to one's conception of oneself as one is seen by others. He writes:

By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgement on myself as an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other . . . Shame is by nature recognition. I recognize that I am as the Other sees me.<sup>97</sup>

For as Sartre relates in this passage - and this seems also directly relevant to Thomas - to be surrounded by others and their values is ultimately to question one's own motivation and one's own sense of personal integrity. Sartre maintains that "shame is shame *of oneself before the Other*; these two structures are inseparable."<sup>98</sup> It is no coincidence therefore that Thomas perceives the war specifically in terms of how this relates to his life with his wife. He writes: "I'm afraid I didn't set my new wife a fine example of male steadfastness" (MS, 9). The bombs, too, are perceived specifically in terms of their effect on his wife: "the wind that ruffled / the woman's skirt came / from no normal direction" (ERS, 19). Thomas is powerless here to be able to stop even the smallest of effects. His sense of loss and displacement is thus intensified, and again, the word 'fear' reappears:

He learned fear  
The instinctive fear  
of the animal that finds

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<sup>97</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 1969) 222. Originally published 1943, the English translation appeared in 1958. 222.

<sup>98</sup> Sartre 222.

the foliage about its den  
 disarranged and comes to know  
 it can never go there again. (ERS, 19)

Here is another sense of uncanny displacement, for Thomas realises that he has little ability to protect his wife in this situation. Fear gives way to insecurity, as their home, and their life together becomes ‘disarranged’ and insecure. In face of such a threat, his bravery and his masculinity as a man and as protecting husband also came under intense scrutiny – primarily from himself – and it is indeed one of the periods in which Thomas experiences the greatest sense of anxiety concerning himself. He is caught uneasily, once more, in a position of passivity, and action becomes the much-pondered alternative. Action, after all, entailed being part of the collective, and also part of a tradition, rather than standing alone at the periphery. “Whether volunteering or conscripted, they went forth to the war, as their fellows had done hundreds of years. ‘Would not have missed it for worlds’” (ERS, 20). Thomas stands apart from the community and the collective, singularised in the fact that “Others were brave” (ERS, 20) while he himself, in his own opinion, was not. In The Echoes Return Slow, he notes how “action has its compensations” (ERS, 20) and questions, “What does a man do with his silence, his aloneness, but suffer the sapping of unanswerable questions?” (ERS, 20). This culminates in a sense of guilt and confusion on the poet’s behalf, the recognition of a ‘double’ within him:

Entered for life, failing  
 to qualify; understudied  
 for his persona, became identical  
 with his twin. Confronted  
 as the other, knew credit  
 was his for the triumph  
 of an imposture. Slipped easily  
 into the role for which



his double was cast, bowing  
 as low as he to appropriate  
 the applause. When volunteers  
 were called for to play  
 death's part, stood modestly  
 in the wings, preferring rather  
 to be prompter than prompted. (ERS, 21)

Constantly in this poem, Thomas addresses the duality present within himself – he becomes “persona,” “twin,” “other,” “imposture,” “double,” uneasily deconstructing himself, unity dissolving as he considers the alternative lives he might have led. He experiences estrangement on several levels. His pacifism, is both integral to his identity, and yet also makes him feel guilty, as he “stood modestly / in the wings, preferring rather / to be prompter rather than prompted.” His ‘twin’ also takes on another meaning, for Thomas is also aware of the alternative. What if he himself had gone to war? If he had been put in that position, how would he have reacted? Thomas is as if plagued by a parallel universe, trying desperately to convince himself that his own reality is somehow authentic. And yet the “unanswerable questions” remain: “Are the brave lacking in imagination? Are the imaginative not brave, or do they find it more difficult to be brave?” (ERS, 20). Thomas faces these questions hypothetically for, as a curate, he is not expected to go to war. But lurking at the back of his mind is the question of whether or not he is opposed to go to war on the ground of his pacifist beliefs, or because he is afraid of doing so. Again, this is a much later analysis of his behaviour at the time, but it is still revelatory of Thomas’s insecurities concerning his role and identity.

It is perhaps easy to see how Thomas, plagued in Hanmer by such varying degrees of insecurity, began to see again the need to give his search a specific focus. It is

almost as if Thomas reaches a climactic point of dislocation here, and needs desperately to assert himself. He writes:

So hateful was it to the curate to think of the destruction occurring almost every night, and such was his *hiraeth* for the hills in the distance. . . . that he decided to learn Welsh as a means of enabling him to return to the true Wales. (A, 50)

In learning Welsh, Thomas not only desires to become part of a Welsh-speaking community, but also to turn his spiritual ideal of cultural unity – what he calls “the true Wales of my imagination” (A, 10) – into a living reality. In both instances ‘Welsh-identity’ stands before him as a kind of authentic, valid sense of self, perhaps as a kind of solution to his otherwise insecure ‘English’ identity, one that has somehow become untrue in light of his new experience.

The move to learn Welsh was also a distinctly active move for the repeatedly ‘passive’ R.S.Thomas, marking his determination to take control of his own identity in a way which had previously been denied him. And yet, as it is the Wales of the romantic ideal, “of the imagination,” that Thomas wants to capture, the “Welsh hills outlined darkly against the afterglow” (MS, 9), the Wales “of lonely farms and dark-faced people, and a past of strife and bloodshed” (MS, 9), there is also the sense of Thomas’s attempting to actualise that what is essentially a fiction, born of personal need. It is again “the wild purple of the sea” - the unreal, mysterious image - that colours, and clouds, his national vision.

Thomas began therefore to take Welsh lessons: “Partly from a cowardly wish to get away from this [i.e. war] in a place where I did not belong, but more from a desire to have the whole of Wales open to me” (MS, 9). Realising the restrictive nature of his English-language identity, he wanted to authenticate himself, to become a “true,” and ‘complete’ Welshman. In beginning to learn Welsh, however, he became further aware of himself as an outsider, as he was still bound, creatively at least, to the language of his upbringing, in which his poetry was written. Continuing to write in English, while asserting himself as a ‘Welshman’ now seemed more contradictory than ever, and it became increasingly difficult for R.S. Thomas to prove, to himself as much as to others, that his poetry was “Welsh” despite the fact that he used the colonial tongue.

Thomas was not, however, alone in this cultural dilemma. During this time, he became increasingly aware of a number of writers who faced the same predicament, and he became a regular contributor to the periodical *Wales*, a magazine that provided a platform for those English-language writers who wished earnestly to be considered Welsh. Although R.S. Thomas had been aware of this publication in the thirties, it was when the editor, Keidrych Rhys, resumed publication in 1943 that he began to contribute, reflecting the development of his cultural ideas during this time. *Wales* in fact mirrored many of Thomas’s internal conflicts. The *unheimlich* element brought about by the uncertainties of the 1930s and the then impending war had a significant impact on the re-definition of cultural/national identity within Wales. As Welshmen were sent to war in the name of ‘Britain,’ for instance, there emerged a need to distinguish the Welsh from the larger British ‘mass,’ a sentiment which found its literary expression in publications such as *Wales* and also the *Welsh Review*. As Keidrych Rhys remarks: “For the war has

made the Welsh realise that they are a nation with a country, a people, a culture and a tradition *different* from England's to fight for."<sup>99</sup> This awareness of difference provided those caught in the nebulous ground of the 'Anglo-Welsh' with a specific space to express their identity and ideas. This also enabled them to construct themselves as a separate (separate, that is, from the English) cultural body and community.

It was perhaps a natural progression for Thomas, having already published his work in *Dublin Magazine*, to move on to express his identity in Welsh magazines. *Wales*, in particular, was a publication that allowed Thomas the freedom to *explore* his Welsh identity and values while also confronting his English background, this being the common experience of many of the other contributors. As Thomas writes:

To many of us, especially to those whom education and upbringing had diverted elsewhere, the main value of the Anglo-Welsh movement of that time will seem to lie in its success in directing our minds to a neglected part of our development, namely the consciousness of nationality, of belonging. The world is full enough of deracinés, God knows, and it is no small blessing, this sense of belonging.<sup>100</sup>

Thomas, in becoming aware of the fact that his frustration is a shared experience, is even able to conceive of himself in specific cultural terms – as the deraciné – able to explore more freely the notion of his uprooted existence in Wales. In contrast to the unease

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<sup>99</sup> Keidrych Rhys, Editorial, *Wales*, Issue 1 (July 1943): 4.

<sup>100</sup> Transcript of "A Time for Carving," BBC Wales radio broadcast, 1957.

Thomas felt in his early adult life in being part of a group, his involvement with *Wales* enabled him to locate his *hiraeth*, his personal longing for a secure identity, within a specific cultural context. In the first issue of the new series of *Wales* in 1943, Keidrych Rhys writes, “There is a new wave of national feeling among our people. There is, in truth a Welsh renaissance.”<sup>101</sup> Given this re-birth, Thomas’s position as an outsider was almost necessary, in being one of many who experienced a renewed awareness and interest in cultural affairs. *Wales* also defined itself primarily in terms of a literary and cultural heritage, the emphasis on identities constructed through knowledge of Welsh culture, rather than linguistic pre-requisites. “The policy of *Wales* then,” writes Keidrych Rhys in his editorial, “will be a serious and responsible one *towards* Wales. We are primarily a cultural magazine – cultural in the broadest sense.”<sup>102</sup> As R.S. Thomas records in his “Probings” interview with Ned Thomas and John Barnie, his disillusion with the reality of Welsh life was also responsible for the fact that he felt he had something to contribute to the pages of *Wales*. In moving to the parish of Manafon “full of romantic ideas about the moorlands to the west and the Welsh-speakers who lived there” (MS, 26), he had, on his arrival, been alerted to Welsh social problems for the first time: “So one way and another I was fallow ground for the ideas which Keidrych Rhys was circulating in his attempt at a revival of Welsh writing in English” (MS, 26). *Wales* had come to represent therefore a kind of salvation, a means of redirecting his displaced cultural ideals.

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<sup>101</sup> Rhys, *Wales* (July 1943): 4.

<sup>102</sup> Rhys, *Wales* (July 1943): 4.

It is during this time that Thomas came first into contact with Saunders Lewis. “Having been stirred by an article of his in *Y Faner*, I went with youthful braggadocio to ‘offer my services to Wales!’” (MS, 26), recalls Thomas, playfully derisive of his own naïve action. This was however a key event in Thomas’s life, focussing his previous, rather vague, Celtic idealism into an aware of the specific urgency of the ‘cause’ at this time, and marking his emergence also into Welsh political life. There is also another account of this meeting:

He read in *Y Faner* an article by Saunders Lewis which finished with the words, ‘*O flodyn y dyffryn, deffro*’ (‘Oh, flower of the valley, awake’). He was stirred through and through. He went to Llanfarian to visit Saunders Lewis without a word of introduction. He was received kindly and began to speak in English about his ideals and plans, but in no time at all was led by Saunders to soldier on in his imperfect Welsh. (A, 54)

It is perhaps significant that the very passage that influenced him so profoundly was one that urged the collective consciousness to awaken, awakening also, it seems, something deep within Thomas himself. Following this meeting, he gradually became, as M. Wynn Thomas has indicated, a kind of disciple of Saunders Lewis’s cultural ideology (MS, 63). Having received “a kind of benediction” (MS, 63) from Lewis to write in the English language, he continued to do so, but by adopting those values, as will be discussed in the following chapter, that Saunders Lewis considered essential in developing a distinctive national character: non-urban, agrarian and indigenou.

Thomas's awareness of the importance of a literary community such as that associated with *Wales*, meant that he was also alerted to the 'traditional' role of the Welsh poet, and of his own responsibility, as a poet, towards the continuation of Welsh culture. If he had not been previously aware of the role the poet had traditionally played within the Welsh community, he would certainly have found it authenticated in Idris Bell's essay on "The Welsh Poetic Tradition," also published in the first issue of the new series of *Wales*, in which Bell argues:

that poets should learn their craft as disciples of a master, should even pass examinations and take degrees, that the poet should be a public official, as he was in Medieval Wales, and should be subjected to such rigid rules, metrical and otherwise, as obtained in Wales – all this is quite alien to English ideas.<sup>103</sup>

As Bell emphasises, the poet's vocation, and indeed the way in which the poet is perceived by his surrounding community, was essentially different in Wales; the role of the Welsh poet was to be "the servant of the community, a member of an order which, if it bestows privileges, imposes at the same time corresponding responsibilities."<sup>104</sup> Bell, along with other writers in *Wales* stressed the continuity of tradition to which the Welsh writers in English must adhere if they were to be considered part of Welsh culture. If, in Hanmer, therefore, Thomas had become acutely aware of his own sense of individual responsibility, then through perusing the pages of *Wales* he was also discovering a way of

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<sup>103</sup> Idris Bell, *Wales* (July 1943): 38.

<sup>104</sup> Bell, *Wales* (July 1943): 61.

fulfilling that responsibility as a poet. The role of the poet had suddenly become extremely precise – the poet was there to be a part of and to serve the community – and poetry became more to do with sustaining culture, and ensuring the continuity of tradition than of merely serving one’s own literary interests. It certainly gave Thomas the opportunity to locate himself within a cultural tradition, and also to emphasise himself, once more, as essentially non-English. The English poet was in contrast “an individual artist, expressing an individual experience . . . in his own way,”<sup>105</sup> and one who did not belong to a collective tradition. If Thomas was to remain at the margins, therefore, he would, in a sense, be confirming his own distant ‘Englishness.’

And yet, as is characteristic of any attempt made by Thomas to ‘root’ himself, there were certain issues of authenticity to be addressed. ‘Anglo-Welsh’ writing, and whether writing in English could at the same time be a genuine expression of Welsh experience, was also being actively debated (though simultaneously championed) within the pages of *Wales*. Wynn Griffith stated that “I suspect this label Anglo-Welsh is an easy way of announcing to the English reader that the writer pre-judges the issue by claiming to be ‘different.’ If he is ‘different,’ his writing will show it.”<sup>106</sup> Other writers were also concerned that the “Anglo-Welsh-ism” would become a kind of substitutive translation medium for the English:

. . . this business of *reintegration* has been burked and for  
it the Anglo-Welsh writers have substituted the easier task

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<sup>105</sup> Bell, *Wales* ( July 1943): 38.

<sup>106</sup> Wynn Griffith, *Wales* (July 1943): 16.



of *interpretation* – of explaining the Welsh to the English.<sup>107</sup>

This addresses one of the most evident dangers of employing the colonial tongue as a component of ‘difference’ – that is, that it merely eases the integration process, and results in becoming the means through which the coloniser is allowed to ‘enter’ (and also invade) the otherwise intrafamilial discourse.<sup>108</sup> Alert to such dangers, some voiced the concern that “interpretation in the first instance should serve the parent culture rather than the outside world,”<sup>109</sup> and thus strengthening the hold of the English language, rather than liberating the minority language and culture. Thomas was undoubtedly aware of such tension, attempting, within his own prose pieces during this period, to stress the necessity of actively contributing to Welsh culture: “I found myself stressing the necessary qualifications of a truly Anglo-Welsh writer, namely that he should steep himself in all things Welsh to justify the hyphen” (MS, 26).

But the development of a new Welsh poetic identity could not be achieved without some residual tensions, of course. Thomas had, after all, like all his generation, been educated, and come to literary awareness in, the English literary tradition. His first contribution to *Wales* manifests the complexity of being indebted to two different cultural traditions:

For my own country’s past  
Her lore and language  
I should have by heart.  
‘Twas she who raised me,

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<sup>107</sup> Griffith, *Wales* (July 1943): 17.

<sup>108</sup> John Ptkoulis makes this very point about the translation of R.S. Thomas’s “Autobiographies,” and I have referred to this in the introduction to the thesis.

<sup>109</sup> Griffith, *Wales* (July 1943): 18.

Built me bone by bone  
 Out of the teeming earth, the dreaming stone.  
 Even at my christening she decreed  
 Uprooted I should bleed,  
 And yet for another's sake  
 No wound deletes,  
 No patriotism dulls  
 The true and the beautiful  
 Bequeathed to me by Blake,  
 Shelley and Shakespeare and the ravished Keats.<sup>110</sup>

This was one of five poems published by Thomas in this issue of *Wales*, and is both the most personal and, interestingly, the only one of the four that Thomas has never collected. It is striking in its direct, confrontational tone, although honest in addressing his linguistic unhomeliness in terms of a literary identity. It is a graphic and rigorous description of displacement - "Uprooted I should bleed" - one that craves identity rooted in place, rather than literature, "Out of the teeming earth, the dreaming stone." The tone of the poem also differs considerably from the sentimentalist, lyrical poetry of Thomas's 'Georgian' period, moving rather towards a Neo-Romantic tendency ("Built me bone by bone / Out of the teeming earth"). A significant portion of the poetry published in *Wales* in the period was essentially Neo-Romantic in nature, characterised by its deep consciousness of being rooted in the past and within a specific locality, and also responding directly to the threat to identity posed by the war. While the Neo-Romantic movement was also concerned with the rural and pastoral, it was however open to the irrational, transient, and daemonic side of the natural world. In order to develop the notion of a community rooted in the rhythms of the organic world, that believed in the continuity of tradition, this movement was also constantly alert to the dangers that threatened the stability of that tradition and community. Nature was not, as it has been

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viewed in Georgian terms, escapist and uplifting, it was also the medium through which one viewed the many inconsistencies of the surrounding world, corporeality, sexuality and violence all becoming part of the experience of nature.

Another prominent manifestation of the Neo-Romantic impulse in the period was the sequence of Caseg Broadshets, published between November 1941 and June 1942, resulting from the collaboration between Brenda Chamberlain, her husband John Petts, and Alun Lewis. It was a cultural enterprise that, as Linda Adams states, was aimed to “reunite the *gwerin* and working class through a re-discovery of their shared cultural identity, seeking roots and continuity in the lands and traditions of Wales.”<sup>111</sup> In his letter to Brenda Chamberlain in 1941, Alun Lewis writes that “This project is to reach *the people* – with beauty, and love,”<sup>112</sup> the aim being to sell the broadshets cheaply, in order to reach the ‘common man,’ and to awaken the cultural awareness of *y werin bobl*, rather than to serve the educated, literary elite.

The Broadshets became somewhat of a personal quest for Alun Lewis, satisfying his need, as one who was at war, to engage in “a mutual work for a deep human end,”<sup>113</sup> and to generate a feeling of creative continuity among the people, while their very lives were under threat. Evidently for Lewis, the thought of such a project was essential, enabling him to transcend, momentarily, the sheer horror of his situation, and to neutralise the displacement he himself experienced through war:

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<sup>11</sup> R.S. Thomas, “Confessions of an Anglo-Welshman”, *Wales* (October 1943): 49.

<sup>111</sup> Linda Adams, “Fieldwork: The Caseg Broadshets and the Welsh Anthropologist,” *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays* Vol. 5 (1999): 65.

<sup>112</sup> Brenda Chamberlain, *Alun Lewis & The Making of the Caseg Broadshets* (London: Enitharmon Press, 1969) 7.

I've been pulled into the war and regimented and bullied and taught to kill. That is the measure of the impossibility of our present society being good arable land for human seed. So I have the deep conviction that there are two urgent needs for me: one, to write for; the other, to educate *The People*. In practice, they work together – my writing is an expression of all the conflicts, all the hope and faith and despair that is humanity.<sup>114</sup>

In this letter to Brenda Chamberlain, Lewis's tone is that of the anxious soldier, who needs desperately to find a way to be reintegrated into society, and to be considered once more as 'part of' something. He is alienated, possessed by a feeling that can be described as uncanny, not only in being away from home, but of not being 'at home with himself' through his actions, and that getting to educate 'the people' in some way gives him, once more, meaning and purpose. He also wished that the Broadsheets, in being the "first circulated literature,"<sup>115</sup> would forge a link with an archaic past, and an authentic identity. Towards the end of the letter, one can feel his enthusiasm when he addresses Brenda Chamberlain: "Don't you think it's a tremendous field, Brenda? Wouldn't you *enjoy* working for the people like that, in such an old tradition?"<sup>116</sup>

The "Caseg Broadsheets" had therefore a specific cultural agenda in mind; it was to stress unity and belonging, the continuance of tradition in face of the disruptive impact

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<sup>113</sup> Chamberlain 4.

<sup>114</sup> Chamberlain 6.

<sup>115</sup> Chamberlain 6.

<sup>116</sup> Chamberlain 7.

of the war and world affairs. While this was not dissimilar to the agenda put forth by *Wales*, there were many distinctive differences between the two publications. For one thing, the juxtaposition of artwork and literature that characterised the Broadshets offered an altogether darker vision of cultural survival. Its stark visual quality was used to remind its readers of the disorientating nature of war, and the importance subsequently of the preservation and re-birth of culture within a society under threat. Romanticism did not represent the new tensions of the cultural present; the *Neo*-Romantics however could embrace the more menacing aspect of existence, while also proposing a positive regenerative spirit.

In her essay "Fieldwork: The Caseg Broadshets and the Welsh Anthropologist," Linda Adams explores the role of the Broadshets in reinvigorating Welsh identity and culture, emphasising their connection with the new anthropological outlook on cultural identity in Wales at this time. This had been initiated in the twenties by the Professor H.J Fleure, whose anthropological study of the different racial elements compartmentalised the 'indigenous' Welsh into six different racial types, some of whom he believed to be the remnants of the original pre-Celtic tribes, that is, the true 'aboriginal' Welsh.<sup>117</sup> M.Wynn Thomas has also drawn attention to Fleure's work in his analysis of Thomas's notion of 'indigenous' Welsh culture, stating that "it does seem possible that the idea, which could be extrapolated from such evidence as Fleure offered, that the 'aboriginal' Welsh could still be found . . . proved attractive to an R.S. Thomas who had been so disturbed at Hanmer by modern images of violent invasion."<sup>118</sup> The role of anthropology,

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<sup>117</sup> H.J Fleure, "The Welsh People," *Wales* (October 1939): 265-269.

<sup>118</sup> M. Wynn Thomas, *R.S. Thomas: War Poet* 30.

in this context, was to promote the preservation and almost triumphant nature of archaic Welsh cultural roots, in face of the adversity of war and post-war urban development.

Neo-Romanticism is a movement that has an awareness of impulses akin to the uncanny, in so far as it is a movement that registers the strange and alien within society, attempting to refamiliarise the community/society with itself. At the same time, in order to do this, it must first disturb and disarrange the 'normal' world as a response to these outward changes. It is coupled with Romanticism, a movement of self-exploration, escapism and transcendence with something altogether more disturbing – surrealism - a movement that sought radically to defamiliarise those everyday perceptions of the world explored by the romanticists. Elizabeth Wright, in her essay "The Uncanny and Surrealism," notes the connection between the two concepts, in that "they both focus on the attempts of the unconscious to evoke and reveal in sudden bursts of shock the images of our childhood past still crystallized within us."<sup>119</sup> Surrealism attempts to shock and horrify, and yet ultimately to reflect that which is already within, so that the shock expressed towards something external to oneself is ultimately shock towards something inherent *in oneself*. In this sense also, Wright maintains that "the uncanny can be viewed as subversive rather than merely regressive,"<sup>120</sup> for it manifests repressed desires as much as it does mere childhood memory.

The "Caseg Broadsheets," is perhaps a prime example of a work that is subversive rather than regressive. Despite Alun Lewis's insistence that the people needed to be reached "through love and beauty," it was rather through the disruption of the norms of

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<sup>119</sup> Elizabeth Wright, "The Uncanny and Surrealism," quoted in Modernism and the European Unconscious, eds. Peter Collier and Judy Davies (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990) 268.

love and beauty that this was achieved, through a bold confrontation of the darker elements of existence. The first Broadsheet, for example, sets side by side a wood engraving by John Petts, “Debris Searcher,” and two poems by Alun Lewis, “Raiders’ Dawn” and “Song of Innocence.” The work is a striking mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar, with highly disproportionate dimensions. As the figure of the debris searcher confronts the abyss, his sinewy hands are enlarged as a symbol of desperate survival. Alun Lewis’s “Raiders’ Dawn” subsequently draws attention to the ‘uncanny’ nature of invasion, in a frightening, yet beautiful image: “Blue necklace left / On a charred chair / Tells that Beauty / Was startled there.”<sup>121</sup> The comfortable life, therefore, has suddenly been engulfed, beauty dissolves into nothing and yet, paradoxically, the “blue necklace left / On a charred chair” also commands a haunting beauty of its own.

These last few remnants are also symbolic of continuity and survival, one of the main objectives of the Broadsheets. As Adams states “what Lewis was aiming at . . . was a blueprint for cultural survival that would encompass all of Wales.”<sup>122</sup> Culture, and the community, therefore, was the very thing that enabled people to overcome the threat posed to their lives and tradition. It was also evidently an inherent ‘Welsh’ struggle for survival, calling into question who the readership of such a publication was to be. The language of the Broadsheets was predominantly English, which seems to suggest that this was yet another publication that offered solace to the ambivalently positioned Anglo-Welsh writer. In the cases in which the language of the broadsheets was Welsh, as proved true in the case of the publication of *hen benillion* (traditional, anonymous verses) and the

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<sup>120</sup> Wright 268.

<sup>121</sup> Caseg Broadsheet 1, displayed in Linda Adams’ “Fieldwork.” 66.

work of Taliesin, Peryf ap Cedifor and Gwalchmai, there were translations provided. In light of this detail, it is evident that the Broadsheets attempted to diminish linguistic barriers and, as in the case of *Wales*, to stress Wales's links with its past literary heritage, with the intention of uniting the whole Welsh 'people,' whether they were Welsh-speaking or not. This included, presumably, both the workers of the anglicised industrial valleys and the Welsh-speaking *gwerin*.

It was exactly this kind of *gwerin* that Thomas expected to come across in Manafon, the parish to which he moved in 1942. The move to this supposedly 'Welsh' parish he saw as being rooted in possibilities, both of having of a Welsh-language life and of being immersed in Welsh culture. But, as in the case of his visit to Fiona Macleod's Scotland, his cultural expectations exceeded the reality. On arrival, he was disappointed to discover that not only was there no Welsh spoken in the parish, but that the people themselves had little knowledge of culture, Welsh or otherwise. In fact, paradoxically, in a move by which he had hoped to root himself culturally, he became further displaced and 'dislocated,' feeling deeply uneasy amongst the hard-working, materialistic farmers "who expected more from him than he could give; while they in turn failed to meet his own ideals" (A, 51). This was certainly not the Wales Thomas had constructed for himself, and the hard-working farmers in no way corresponded to Thomas's vision of *y werin bobl*. While he had indeed come among the "lonely farms and dark-faced people," he could not equate this with "a past of strife and bloodshed" (MS, 9) for it was the mechanised, materialistic present that preoccupied the farmers, rather than the heroic, culturally-spirited past.

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<sup>122</sup> Adams 71.



Being in Manafon gave Thomas the sense of still being just on the periphery to something far greater. He notes how “Far to the north-west Cadair Idris was to be seen, to the north Aran Fawddwy and Aran Benllyn with Y Berwyn farther to the east” (A, 11). This feeling intensified when Thomas learned that “Four miles up the valley on the edge of the moorland there was a chapel where Welsh was the main language of the congregation” (A, 11) and that Manafon “was the parish of Ieuan Brydydd Hir, Gwallter Mechain and Penfro, in their day three talented and famous Welshmen” (A, 51). In other words, the culture he had sought had already vanished, its last remnants shrunk up into the hills, and inevitably Thomas continued to feel isolated and estranged, even though he had attempted to render his surroundings *familiar* to himself. It is, again, an Edward Thomas poem “The New House” that Thomas sees as being representative of what he felt on his first night in his new parish (A, 51):

Now, first, as I shut the door,  
I was alone  
In the new house; and the wind  
Begun to moan.<sup>123</sup>

The poem emanates a sense of unease and intense loneliness in realising one is yet again in strange surroundings. It is the *unheimlich* feeling of being in an unfamiliar place – a place one is expected to consider as ‘home.’ There is also a sense of being incarcerated in one’s home, away from others, rather than being at the centre of the community, as R.S. Thomas had hoped to be, at least on a linguistic level. Considering the uncanny’s links with that “which arouses dread and horror” and the supernatural, it is perhaps important to note that Edward Thomas also relates in this poem how his “ears were teased with the dread / Of what was foretold.” The house, his new surroundings, therefore, speak of a life

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that is yet to be lived, and yet it is one that for Thomas is full of dread, and worse still, insignificance: "But I learnt how the wind would sound, / After these things should be."<sup>124</sup> The wind, the natural universe, will continue, indifferent, after the passing of both house and poet.

It is thus revealing that it is this poem, suggestive of a sense of powerlessness, of being prey to destructive forces of nature, that R.S. Thomas associates with his early days at Manafon, a poem that expresses anxiety about self and, explicitly, one's home. His unease is characterised similarly by his ambivalent feelings towards a nearby river, which although comforting to him, also poses a physical threat to his security. The very fact that it is recorded at all, years later, suggests that Thomas must have ascribed considerable significance to it. Thomas records that "that river was like a living thing and as full of moods as a girl. In the summer it shrank to nothing, but in the autumn and winter it would rise suddenly because of the rain and roar past, bearing with it all manner of wreckage" (A, 51). He notes also how the ". . . river became part of their life, sometimes quiet, another time rushing past." Here, therefore, was an element of duplicity, the river as aesthetically pleasing and often calming, but also having the power to destroy. As Thomas records:

I wonder if it comes into the cellar? I asked one day during  
flood water. I opened the cellar door, as I spoke, and there  
it was almost to the top of the steps. I shut the door quickly  
on it, as though it were a wild beast. (MS, 10)

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<sup>123</sup> Edward Thomas, Selected Poems 25.

<sup>124</sup> Thomas, Selected Poems 25.

Yet again, one is in the realm of the uncanny, where one's sense of home, and self, is suddenly threatened by a force that is beyond control: the river has become for Thomas a "wild beast," and within its jaws are the potentialities of his mortality. Such passages undoubtedly reveal Thomas's sense of unease and disorientation in entering a new community, but it also expresses the deeper sense of fear and terrifying vulnerability Thomas felt in entering this particular community.

The above incident could almost serve as an analogy for the poet's general experience of Manafon, for not only was Thomas disappointed with this parish, but also deeply disturbed by what he found there. In Ireland, he had been able to dissipate the sense of the uncanny that had previously haunted him, while in Manafon, far from coming home to a world of rootedness and authenticity, he was once again confronted with "dread and horror." Having idealised his new parish as being representative of the life of *y werin bobl*, a land such as Yeats's Ireland, "of common folk...their ways traditionally Celtic" (A, 48), he found himself facing rather a way of life that was entirely removed from this cultural context.

Thomas's shock and displacement as a rector in Manafon is best exemplified in his 1952 radio broadcast "The Minister." Although he has no doubt attempted to fictionalise the experience, having removed it from himself by making the main character, Morgan, a non-conformist minister, appointed by his congregation (not by the authority of a bishop as Thomas of course was), the autobiographical context is evident enough. Thomas himself admits the connection in a 1974 radio broadcast, in which he states, of "The Minister":

Well, this is probably a projection of myself rather than a true picture of the ministers because non-conformist ministers in Wales on the whole, I would say are quite close to the people, and even though many of them may be slightly more educated and intelligent, nevertheless socially, and in many other ways, they are quite close to their people, so I'm not sure that they are as conscious of this gap as I would be from my own standpoint.<sup>125</sup>

As Thomas relates here, it is this void, this 'gap' between himself and the people that he feels compelled to address in this poem, and also his sense of his own inadequacy among the people, his failure as rector to get close to his congregation. In "The Minister," this divide and estrangement is primarily symbolised by the minister's awkward relationship with his natural surroundings. As in the case of Edward Thomas's threatening wind, or Thomas's conception of the boisterous river, the minister must face the fact that there are also larger forces at work, in face of which his own identity becomes fragile and vulnerable. He is unaccepted by the community, continuously viewed as an outsider, and symbolises, for the people, an institution, so that "they all forgot that even a pastor / Is a man first and a minister after." (CP, 43) Morgan becomes estranged both from his congregation and from himself, from his own purpose. From the outset, religion is contested by the potent force of nature:

'Beloved, let us love one another,' the words are blown  
To pieces by the unchristened wind  
In the chapel rafters, and love's text  
Is riddled by the inhuman cry

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<sup>125</sup> Transcript of "More Poetry at Large 4," BBC Radio 4 broadcast, Dec. 1974.

Of buzzards circling above the moor. (CP, 42)

Even here, in the opening sequence of the poem, religious motifs are commingled with images of the destructive elements, making the community appear fragmentary and transient, as the 'inhuman' world mocks the notion of human identity and values. Not only is the wind 'unchristened' and thus by definition outside the religious framework, but it is also working *against* religious signification rather than being an inherent part of it. Nature has become strange and unfamiliar, no longer associated with divinity but responsible for its undoing. "Love's text / Is riddled" and this 'human' sentiment becomes ridiculed for its insignificance and powerlessness, the word of the book against the word of the elements, again expressing a kind of perverse logic central to the poem's fictional community. From the very opening of the poem, Morgan is seen as entering a community from which he is somehow *already* estranged. He finds that his ideals – and his Christian beliefs would, of course, be akin to Thomas's own – can never be equated with the reality of the life around him.

One of the many difficulties Thomas faced in the parish of Manafon was trying to get to grips with the notion that the surrounding natural world was, for the farmers, a commodity, and that it was intrinsically linked to materialist values. He reflects:

For him, the countryside and its surroundings were beautiful. He wanted to continue to sing poems of praise to them. But how to reconcile with this the life and attitude of the farmers themselves? (A, 52)

For Thomas, it became increasingly difficult for him as a rector to be able to communicate with such people, despite acknowledging their heroism. He notes how "two

thirds of him was in sympathy with these people who had to be out in all weathers tending the land and looking after the animals that were as unmanageable as the people themselves” (A, 52). But of course the other third, for whom reality was a great disappointment, remained possessed by his own ideals. As the Narrator relates in “The Minister”:

This is the land where men labour  
In silence, and the rusted harrow  
Breaks its teeth on the grey stones.  
Below, the valleys are an open book,  
Bound in sunlight; but the green tale  
Told in its pages is not true. (CP, 42)

The ‘green tale’ referred to here is suggestive of Thomas’s idealistic hopes of Manafon before he arrived, the disillusion referring perhaps to Thomas himself, in seeing Cadair Idris and Aran Fawddwy, noting that this in itself was “a prospect sufficient to raise the heart and make the blood sing” (A, 53). However, in his realising that the natural world is in fact a world of hard labour, the notion of the ‘green tale’ takes on another dimension, for it is he himself who is the ‘green’ inexperienced rector, who has never before encountered such realities. It is no wonder, therefore, that in this sense the farmers become frightening figures, whose grotesque behaviour becomes, in the poem, a threat to Morgan’s identity. “They chose their pastors as they chose their horses / For hard work,” (CP, 42-43) states the narrator, stressing the fact that Morgan’s life is to be governed by the community, which again stresses his helplessness. In the voice of the farmer, Davies, this element becomes darker still; “Let him learn his calling first, and choose after / Among our girls, if he must marry” (CP, 43), commands Davies, “Pick someone young, and I’ll soon show him / How things is managed in the hills here” (CP, 44). Although Morgan, too, becomes nothing more than a commodity, he foolishly believes that: “I was

the lamp the elders chose / To thaw the darkness that had congealed / About the hearts of the hill folk” (CP, 46). There exist here two separate realities, and two contradictory worlds, and it is ultimately the tension between these two, and the resultant experience of ‘unreality,’ that leads to Morgan’s downfall. This is not, to repeat, to see Morgan as a direct self-portrait of course; manifestly Thomas maintained his vision in a way that Morgan fails to do. (And it is perhaps necessary to recall that, unlike Morgan, Thomas had a family.) The portrayal of Morgan does suggest something of the struggle Thomas experienced in attempting to transcend the cultural gap between himself and his congregation, and of the spiritual isolation he feels in perpetually compromising his ideals and thus his identity. As Morgan recalls:

I knew and I pretended I didn’t  
 And they knew that I knew and pretended I didn’t.  
 They listened to me preaching the unique gospel  
 Of love; but our eyes never met. (CP, 54)

Morgan here manifests a kind of departure from his former self, the avowal, in many ways, that the community around him has won and that he himself is doomed to become redundant. Here, he is unable to control or influence or inspire the community around him, able merely to play his ‘role,’ artificial though it may be, in the sinful world the community has constructed for him. Again, any sense of individuality, or singular identity, is lost.

The dichotomy of light and darkness becomes a recurring trait during “The Minister,” continuously destabilising the Minister’s perception of the community and becoming symbolic of his ‘blurred’ vision as he attempts to comprehend the people. This ultimately also leads to a questioning of himself. “You thought you knew them,” the narrator remarks, “but they always changed / To something stranger, if you looked

closely / Into their faces" (CP, 45). That which appears familiar becomes once more alien and frightening when one takes a closer look, and again one is in the realm of the uncanny. Continuously therefore, the notion of unfamiliarity disturbs the Minister in his everyday life, and every single aspect of his life appears to be crumbling:

But when you got up to go  
 There was a hand preventing you.  
 And when you tried to cry out, the cry got stuck  
 In your dry throat, and you lay there in travail,  
 Big with your cry, until the dawn delivered you  
 And your cry was still-born and you arose and buried it,  
 Laying on it wreaths of the birds' songs. (CP, 45)

Morgan is suddenly aware of his own insignificance, and thus reverts to a child-like experience of fear and terror. One is reminded, for example, of the R.S. Thomas in The Echoes Return Slow: "The scales fell from my eyes / and I saw faces. I screamed / at the ineffectuality / of love to protect me" (ERS, 5). It is something akin to this 'ineffectuality of love' that the minister experiences, the feeling that such sentiments are mere abstractions, and there will always be darker, unseen forces at work against him. There is something extremely foreboding about the darkness and its 'prevention', the feeling that there is a definite barrier between himself and the community, and also between himself and his own vocation. There is, too, a sense of individuality being futile within the vaster context of nature: "No names last longer than the wind / And the rain let them on the cold tombstone" (CP, 51).

The Minister's title, and that which inscribes his identity, "The Reverend Elias Morgan, B.A." (CP, 45), ultimately has little significance in the midst of such a congregation. Thomas draws attention to the fact that the minister fails in his attempts to become integrated within the community because there are certain 'truths' that he will



never be able to possess. “My knowledge / Would have been complete, had it included / The bare moor, where nature brooded / Over her old, inscrutable secret,” (CP, 46) laments Morgan. There is here an intellectual insecurity and the individual is left with the uncanny feeling of being on the outside, or ‘beyond’ certain types of knowledge. Morgan does not have access to the ‘secret’ language of nature, and remains on the periphery of the community. When, for example, Morgan decides to confront the adultery between Davies and Buddug, the farmer’s voice is seen to be much more powerful than his own, his language at once dehumanising Morgan and terrifying him:

Adultery’s a big word, Morgans: where’s your proof?  
 You who never venture from under your roof  
 Once the night’s come; the blinds all down  
 For fear of the night’s bum rubbing the window. (CP, 51)

Again, the word ‘fear’ here seems telling, signifying the minister’s retreat from the coarse, hard world of the farmers, to a more genteel existence. The irreverent image of the “moon’s bum rubbing the window” is fused with sadness, for Morgan’s ultimate downfall, it appears, is in allowing these insecurities to pervade him, as he “let his mind / Fester with brooding on the sly / Infirmities of the hill people” (CP, 54). Davies’s address is also voyeuristic, noting how Morgan’s private life has become the focus, and indeed, the property of the whole community. At the same time, though, the narrator also suggests that the minister is incarcerated within himself. For “men like Morgan” are “Condemned to wither and starve in the cramped cell / Of thought their fathers made them” (CP, 54).

It is such dehumanisation that suggests a link here with the realm of the uncanny, for it is a territory within which Morgan never ceases to be strange and unfamiliar *to himself*, his life appearing ‘unreal’ or irrelevant, as Thomas may initially have felt his

own to be in Manafon. When Rev. Morgan goes to Aberystwyth for his denomination convention, where they “walked the smooth / Pavements of Aber and compared their lot / To the white accompaniment of the sea’s laughter,” (CP, 49) he feels at home, assured among others, similar to himself. But on his return to the parish, he finds that “someone had broken a window / During my absence and let a bird in. / I found it dead, starved, on the warm sill” (CP, 50). This haunting, troubling image, gives way to Morgan’s realisation that:

There is always the thin pane of glass set up between us  
And our desires.  
We stare and stare and stare, until the night comes  
And the glass is superfluous. (CP, 50)

Hence once more the image suggests an uncanny moment: the unattainable desire that can be visualized though not actualised, the failure to achieve it making one focus all the more closely on oneself. The minister is seen as one who must see all that is occurring around him; and yet being unable to engage actively in any of it, remaining ‘trapped’ behind the glass – his own individual personality and identity becoming a mere faint reflection.

Although the figure of Morgan can be seen to symbolise Thomas in many ways, it is arguably in the creation of Iago Prytherch that Thomas attempts, most seriously, to articulate and to deal with his alienation from the Manafon community. Prytherch also allows him to confront otherness within himself. Although his feelings towards this haunting character are constantly shifting, so much so that it is near impossible to take any of the poems as a once-and-for-all verdict on Iago, there is little doubt that his constant reappearance marks an internal preoccupation. Iago Prytherch comes into

existence during Thomas's Manafon period, and remains an influence throughout much of the poetry of his Eglwys-fach period. Of the emergence of his creation, Thomas writes:

On a dark, cold day in November, on his way to visit a family in a farm over a thousand feet above sea-level, he saw the farmer's brother out in the field, docking mangels. The thing made a profound impression on him, and when he returned to the house after the visit he set about writing 'A Peasant,' the first poem to attempt to face the reality of the scenes around him. (A, 52)

As Thomas here suggests, his recognition of Iago, a character so vastly different from himself, became a means of confronting those things that he found unsettling in the society around him. The fact that this one meeting ultimately evolved into a number of poems dealing with recollections, chance encounters and dialogues with this specific character suggests that he is a figure of paramount importance to the poet. Throughout Thomas's career as a poet, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, Prytherch kept surfacing, as something, perhaps, that "ought to have remained secret and hidden but which has come to light," perhaps, once more, signifying that which Thomas finds frightening, and yet strangely familiar, frightening precisely *because* familiar. The figure of the farmer presented, for Thomas as an idealistic young rector in Manafon, life outside the mythologised Wales he had so carefully constructed, so that the appearance of Prytherch became, in one sense, also a shattering of ideals. The more defined Iago Prytherch became, the less able Thomas was to integrate himself fully into the community of Manafon. As long as Iago was viewed as something different, alien, potentially even

threatening, as 'other,' Thomas would still be unable to equate his ideals with the reality of the life he had entered at Manafon.

Rather than considering Prytherch simply as some kind of 'alter-ego' for Thomas, therefore, it is possibly more accurate to consider him as a kind of 'double,' a figure perceived by Freud as having particular significance within the field of the uncanny. The double, as defined in Freudian terms, is a kind of "ego disturbance" (U, 236) that stands in one's way, that calls one's sense of individual identity into question. For the individual, the double becomes a means of restraining "all the unfulfilled but possible futures to which we like to cling in phantasy" (U, 236). The 'double,' in this sense, becomes the adversary to the individual's desires, "which has caused the ego to project that material outward as something foreign to itself" (U, 236). The double also conjures dread in one's existence, for it ultimately challenges one's self from developing: "The 'double' has become a thing of terror, just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned into demons" (U, 236). As is characteristic of the uncanny, the double comes to represent one's own personal anxieties, and is related to that which is already part of oneself. In comprehending Iago Prytherch in this way, it becomes necessary to explore Thomas's relationship with his creation, and to explore Iago Prytherch as a manifestation both of Thomas's desires and anxieties.

An appropriate point at which to start is through a consideration of Iago's 'coming to life' in the poem 'A Peasant,' Thomas's most anthologised and most widely discussed poem. This poem, first collected in The Stones of the Field in 1946, dramatises Thomas's first stark confrontation with the farmer. Immediately, his identity stands before Thomas: "Iago Prytherch his name, be it allowed / Just an ordinary man of the

bald Welsh hills" (CP, 4), a solid entity whom Thomas must attempt to contemplate as one of his 'flock.' He is initially characterised by his very ordinariness, as if Thomas is in one sense attempting to come to terms with the 'reality' of Manafon, for in Manafon such characters *are* commonplace, and Thomas must accept Prytherch in order to actualise himself as part of the community. Slowly, however, the destabilising, terrifying propensities of Prytherch's existence begin to haunt the poet, and his inability to comprehend such characters as Prytherch betray his initial claim that he is no more to him than "just an ordinary man of the bald Welsh hills." (CP, 4) As Thomas's gaze intensifies on this curious figure, Thomas is mesmerised by the strangely compelling vision of Prytherch "chipping the green skin / From the yellow bones with a half-witted grin of satisfaction." And yet, taken a step further, the vision repels him, for he visualises him "fixed in his chair / Motionless, except when he leans to gob in the fire." (CP, 4) It becomes evident, and in particular as Thomas uses the uncharacteristic, deliberately non-genteel register "gob," that this character poses for him a problem of definition, a disruption of himself and his cultured values, in the fact that he is at pains to come to terms with the reality around him. Again there is a confrontation with fear: "There is something frightening in the vacancy of his mind"; the very use of the adjective here registers the depth of shock that Iago presents to Thomas, to the whole body of assumptions with which the educated poet-priest engages the world. That shock is all the more acute, given the disparity between Iago and the ideal that Thomas had constructed of the cultured, imaginatively-aware *gwerin*.

Thomas ultimately concludes that Iago's 'stark naturalness' is something covert and hidden within *himself*, the most uncanny realisation of all. In acknowledging that he

and Prytherch are of the same essence, of the same world, through rendering Prytherch as once more 'canny' and *heimlich* to himself, and to the reader, and to the universal order, he once more becomes estranged from himself. While the tone seems at first reassuring ("this is your prototype . . . / an impregnable fortress / Not to be stormed even in death's confusion" CP, 4), there is also something profoundly unsettling in this concept, and a realisation in Thomas of his own otherness. There remains, therefore, a kind of eeriness at the end of the poem, as Prytherch "under the curious stars" becomes a strange, haunting vision of Thomas himself.

Many of the Iago Prytherch poems engage a discourse of refamiliarisation. His 'affinity' is recurrently stressed by Thomas, as he seems determined to identify him as 'common' man. He is seen as the "first man of the new community," (CP, 16) a man who "can teach . . . / More in old silence than in youthful song." (CP, 7) Relatedly, Thomas insists on stressing Prytherch's humanity: "He also is human, and the same small star, / That lights you homeward, has inflamed his mind / With the old hunger, born of his kind," (CP, 8) "a man like you, but blind with tears / of sweat to the bright star that draws you on." (CP, 39) Prytherch's 'own' voice is also used to reaffirm his human status: "what I am saying / Over the grasses rough with dew / Is, Listen, listen, I am a man like you" (CP, 31).

And yet, such attempts at re-familiarising Prytherch point ultimately toward instability on Thomas's behalf. It is as he himself admits, an "attempt to face the reality of the scenes around him" (A, 52), rather than being in any way a clear-cut solution to the many problems posed to him by Prytherch's existence. In Julia Kristeva's study Strangers to Ourselves, Kristeva explores the notion of the foreigner. The foreigner can be at once

perceived in the figure of the stranger, he who is alien, or 'outside,' but it can also be perceived as a sense of internal foreignness, the feeling that one is somehow a stranger *to oneself*. Kristeva notes how the twofold relationship between oneself and one's other is somehow a crucial precondition of understanding this foreignness: "the archaic, narcissistic self. . . projects out of itself what it experiences as dangerous or unpleasant in itself, making of it an alien *double*, uncanny and daemonic."<sup>126</sup> While there is an attempt on Thomas's behalf therefore to 'understand' his double in relation to himself, it must also be taken into account that here is an 'other' projected primarily out of fear.

Kristeva writes:

Strange is the experience of the abyss separating me from the other who shocks me – I do not perceive him, perhaps he crushes me because I negate him. Confronting the foreigner whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify, I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container, the memory of experiences when I had been abandoned overwhelm me, I lose my composure. I feel "lost," "indistinct," "hazy." The uncanny strangeness allows for many variations: they all repeat the difficulty I have in situating myself with respect to the other and keep going over the course of identification-projection that lies at the foundation of my reaching autonomy.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1991) 183.

<sup>127</sup>Kristeva, 187.

As Kristeva explains here, the process of understanding one's other ultimately becomes a process of understanding oneself, in relation to the other. The twofold relationship ("confronting the foreigner whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify") entails that the relationship is ultimately an uneasy and ambivalent one. Such, one feels, is the relationship between Thomas and Iago Prytherch. There is an attempt, on Thomas's behalf, to condition Prytherch as something inherent in his world, as signifying something in his own nature previously unknown to him. Kristeva notes of the foreigner that "By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself."<sup>128</sup> It is this strategy, perhaps, that can be seen in Thomas's most tender intimations of Iago Prytherch, such as can be seen in the poem "Memories," in which poet and peasant stand side by side:

Come Iago, my friend, and let us stand together  
 Now in the time of the mild weather,  
 Before the wind changes and the winter brings  
 The leprous frost to the fields, and I will sing  
 The land's praises, making articulate  
 Your strong feelings, your thoughts of no date,  
 Your secret learning, innocent of books. (AL, 38)

In this poem, Thomas becomes determined to articulate Prytherch's silenced voice, attempting once more to close the gulf between them. Prytherch is once more to be seen as a part of nature, and will continue to be after Thomas's departure. Prytherch existed, he states "When I was a child too small even to have heard / Under the sombre foliage of the sky / The owl and the badger answering my cry" (AL, 38). Thomas feels able, this time more positively, to identify with Prytherch as a kind of double. He evidently also feels that his own inherent connection to nature, "The owl and the badger answering my

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<sup>128</sup> Kristeva, 1.



cry,” (AL, 38) is somehow emphasised by Prytherch’s presence, and Thomas can now identify with this element in himself.

But at the same time, there are also several instances within the Prytherch poems in which Thomas *cannot* recognize Prytherch in himself, and in which he and Prytherch become once more polarised, linked together and yet uneasily so, the double becoming once more “a thing of terror.” In recognising Prytherch as somehow an inherent part of humanity, Thomas is also forced to recognise his own, less desirable qualities, as they appear to him in Iago Prytherch. The poem “Valediction,” for instance, is one in which Thomas experiences a sudden disillusion with his double:

You failed me, farmer, I was afraid you would  
The day I saw you loitering with the cows,  
Yourself one of them but for the smile,  
Vague as moonlight, cast upon your face  
From some dim source, whose nature I mistook. (CP, 38)

In this poem, Thomas must confront the fact that his previous poetic intimations of Prytherch, have in fact, been based on a misconception. Again, as in the case of “The Minister,” a ‘sudden light’ is enacted in which Thomas supposedly sees the character more clearly; realising that the familiarity bestowed on his creation is, in fact, an illusion, a trick of the light. “The hills had grace, the light clothed them,” writes Thomas, “so that I thought . . . / that you yourself / Wore that same beauty by the right of birth” (CP, 38). Thomas once more realises that Prytherch is not, as he had hoped, a part of creation, and of universal significance, but rather alien to it, at the extreme pole of his own expectations. He experiences disgust in realising that “your uncouthness has / No kinship with the earth, where all is forgiven” (CP, 38) and that “Unnatural and inhuman, your

wild ways / Are not sanctioned; you are condemned by man's potential stature" (CP, 38).

The notion of 'affinity' of 'likeness' between the two suddenly repels him.

Again, it is necessary to consider the double as a kind of "ego-disturbance," for it is evident here that Thomas's reaction towards Prytherch is in fact more to do with his own misconception of the hill farmer figure. It is from the standpoint of his own previous assertions that Iago Prytherch suddenly appears alien to him, it is "For this I leave you," rejecting Prytherch because he has somehow refused to conform to the life constructed for him by Thomas's idealistic vision. He has refused the qualities Thomas has attempted to give him: "you shut your heart against them," laments Thomas, "you stopped your ears" (CP, 38). The embittered tone of this poem is directed inward towards Thomas himself, for he realises his own failure to comprehend Iago Prytherch, and must acknowledge his own feelings of distaste and disgust toward him. It is Thomas's own identity, additionally, that is called into question.

The figure of the uncanny fictional double offers a sense of how Thomas attempted to deal with those realities around him in Manafon, and how through identifying with, and occasionally repelling, Iago Prytherch, Thomas was able to evolve a means of continuously addressing his own estrangement. The next chapter will therefore take this conjecture a step further, and attempt to demonstrate how, through identifying with a so-called real-life double, in the form of Hugh MacDiarmid, Thomas attempted to confront and counteract his burgeoning sense of alienation through *cultural* means. Hugh MacDiarmid became for Thomas a kind of cultural double, one whose motivations and objectives imbued in him a passionate sense of belonging, urging him on towards the

“true Wales of his imagination,” affording Thomas the belief that it may be still within his grasp.

## 2

**“A mixture of Welsh imagination and Scottish intellectualism:”<sup>129</sup> R.S. Thomas and Hugh MacDiarmid**

But now a new Don Quixote has arisen in Scotland to break a lance with the all-pervading twentieth-century rationalism that goes hand in hand with western democracy and industrial development. Perhaps it would hearten him to know that his good servant, Sancho Panza, keeps up the fight in Wales against the same enemy. (SLPR, 30)

For I am not an Englishman, but utterly different,  
And I throw Scotland’s challenge at the English again.<sup>130</sup>

In his 1946 prose piece “Some Contemporary Scottish Writing,” R.S. Thomas urged “in order to prepare himself for the task of clearing the ground in his own country, every Welshman should read *Lucky Poet*. Let him substitute in almost every case the word ‘Wales’ for ‘Scotland’ and the revelation will be shattering” (SLPR, 30). *Lucky Poet* is, of course, the autobiography, described as “A Self-Study in Literature and Political Ideas,” of the Scots vernacular poet Hugh MacDiarmid, the charismatic “utterly different” Don Quixote for whom Thomas is prepared to adopt the status of the dutiful Sancho Panza. *Lucky Poet* was first published in 1943, and it is evident, from Thomas’s response to the text three years later, that he felt its content to have particular relevance to

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<sup>129</sup> R.S. Thomas, “A Welsh View of the Scottish Renaissance,” *Wales*, Vol. VIII, no. 30 (1948): 604.

<sup>130</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, *Lucky Poet: A Self-Study in Literature and Political Ideas Being the Autobiography of Hugh MacDiarmid (Christopher Murray Grieve)* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994). Originally published in 1943. Further references will be given parenthetically in the text (LP).

Wales. Wales and Scotland were, after all, in a similar colonial situation, both countries facing Anglicisation and homogenisation within a larger, 'British' mass, thus needing, in Thomas's view, to employ similar modes of cultural resistance "against the same enemy" in order to survive. What is perhaps all the more "shattering" about the similarity is the fact that it was MacDiarmid, and not Thomas, who initiated the Scots/Welsh comparison; it was MacDiarmid who first felt 'haunted' by the 'Welshness' of his own cultural ideology. Lucky Poet is, in fact, informed throughout by Welsh literary and political sources and, from Taliesin to Saunders Lewis, MacDiarmid is insistent that the same contexts "belong to Scottish literature as they do to Welsh" (LP, 85). MacDiarmid also had a strong personal connection with Wales, having worked as a reporter for the *Monmouthshire Labour News* in 1911, during the politically fraught period of the miners strikes and riots in South Wales.<sup>131</sup> Thomas's articles "Some Contemporary Scottish Writing" (1946) and "A Welsh View of the Scottish Renaissance"(1948) are, in many ways, a continuation, therefore, of MacDiarmid's dialogue with Wales, while also signalling Thomas's own burgeoning need for cultural identification.

In appropriating MacDiarmid's cultural ideology, it would seem however that Thomas was underlining those cultural parallels already recognised by his Scottish counterpart. Thomas's request in "Some Contemporary Scottish Writing" for Lucky Poet's Welsh readers to "replace 'Wales' with 'Scotland'" is in fact an *imitation* of Lucky Poet's methodology, an intricate allusion that reverses the original comparison. It is the exact strategy used by MacDiarmid in appropriating the following quotation by John Cowper Powys:

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My feelings spring from a mania for the organic as contrasted with the aesthetic. The Scottish (I substitute “Scottish” for Powys’s “Welsh”) spirit is as rich and mysterious, and inexhaustible as the French or Russian or the Spanish, and what I reluct at and rebel against in this word “culture” is the hint, the suggestion, the atmosphere it conveys of something not *absolutely inevitable*. As a Scotsman, I am “too proud to fight” under the banner of *culture*. I don’t hear Frenchmen talking of French culture, or Russians talking of Russian culture; and why not? Because such a thing is only one aspect of Scottish life. . . . The clue-word it seems to me is the word *cynneddf* or *kynnedyf*, which means a “magical peculiarity”. . . . And this notion that the way things go in our confused world depends on something in human nature as well as something in nature that refuses to be reduced to any law and insists on escaping all logical analysis has one admirable effect: without destroying psychology it puts it into its place. And may it not be that this poetical-whimsical tragical-arbitrary view of human character and human fate is one of the vital qualities that emerge from Scottish literature? (LP, 82).

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<sup>131</sup> A more detailed account of his time in Monmouth can be found in Catherine Kerrigan, Whaur Extremes Meet: The Poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid 1920-1934 (Edinburgh: The Mercat Press, 1983) 17-18.

John Cowper Powys makes it evident here, as does MacDiarmid in his appropriation of this quotation (as subsequently also does Thomas), that he feels a need to differentiate between the narrow definition of 'culture' in aesthetic and artistic terms, and 'culture' as signifying a living reality. He implies that culture should be regarded as a living thing, symbolic of the continuation of a people in a place, and within a given community. He implies that culture is not external to one's self but *internal*, already part of one's being, characterised instinctively, and is that which one's *cynneddf*, one's indecipherable "magical peculiarity" reveals.

At a time when Thomas's own cultural identity was tenuous and insecure, threatened by notions of the uncanny, it would no doubt have been reassuring to discover that Wales was considered a kind of cultural template for other 'Celtic' cultures. This, in one sense, validated the very identity he sought, and it is little wonder that Thomas felt the need to reinforce that notion, to stress subsequently the *interdependence*. In "A Welsh View of the Scottish Renaissance," for example, he writes that "We need one another, the Scotch and the Welsh, and we may by studying each other's problem see our own in a new light."<sup>132</sup> The phrase "each other's problem" also brings to mind the individual, personal implications of the comparison. Was Thomas hoping, perhaps, that as Wales became more like Scotland, he himself would become more like MacDiarmid? The writer he viewed as:

a man of real stature. . . . who exercises a stimulating  
influence upon his admirers, not only by personal integrity,  
but also through his preference of Welsh [I here substitute

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<sup>132</sup> Thomas, "A Welsh View" 604.

'Welsh' for Thomas's 'Scots'] as a medium of poetic expression (SLPR, 24).

The above assertion also pinpoints another of MacDiarmid's attractive qualities, the fact that his identity as a writer was also of a linguistic nature. MacDiarmid's chosen medium was Scots, a Scottish form of English, which he used consciously as the substitutive language, hoping to advocate a Scottish Renaissance leading back to use of the Gaelic vernacular. R.S. Thomas, constantly plagued by the question: "how in virtue of his mind and vision can he best save his country – directly through political action, or indirectly through his creative work?" (SLPR, 38), was provided with a solution that seemed to fulfil both these objectives. Through MacDiarmid, he hoped that he, too, along with others in the 'Anglo-Welsh' literary circle, would be able to use the English language in a linguistically resistant way, capturing, as Scots did, the element of *difference* that could be expressed through use, and also perhaps *misuse* of the colonial language. He hoped that it would, as a result, prove to be "a re-cymrification of Wales," (SLPR, 33) rather than serve as a poignant reminder of Wales's colonisation by England. The uniqueness of MacDiarmid's poetry, for R.S. Thomas, lay in the fact that he used words and phrases derived from a pre-colonial era, those words present, as Thomas states, "before the stranger came with his superior lisp" (SLPR, 24). In this way, therefore, MacDiarmid was able to avoid the pitfalls of linguistic colonisation, evoking simple, rooted language that, for Thomas, grew "independently of towns and coteries and all the clap-trap of so called progressive writers" (SLPR, 25).

It is also worth briefly considering how Thomas's reading of MacDiarmid relates to the uncanny. Through attempting to identify with a writer such as MacDiarmid,



Thomas is, arguably, attempting to counter those forces of alienation that are ‘at work’ upon him, making an attempt to ‘belong’ culturally, to renounce the ‘self’ in attempting to consider himself as part of a collective. When he begins to delve further into Scottish writing, he remarks that “What I found was heartening, to say the least” (SLPR, 24), and greatly admires MacDiarmid’s resolution to “get back to the native roots” (SLPR, 24). Through MacDiarmid, Thomas is imbued with a specific purpose: it is to urge his own compatriots on towards a national awakening, through the cultural, and linguistic methods exemplified by Scots writing, and practised by its figurehead, Hugh MacDiarmid.

Curiously enough, however, Thomas’s attempt at identifying with MacDiarmid can also be *read* as uncanny, for his ‘comparative’ ideology, in itself, suggests that Thomas is not merely *influenced* by MacDiarmid, but perhaps uncannily ‘haunted’ by him. That is, such a specific technique of referencing back and forth between cultures and authors, and in particular of considering Wales and Scotland as ‘automatically’ interchangeable in any given sentiment, also suggests a more acute example of the uncanny, the phenomenon of the “phantom text.” This term, developed by Nicholas Royle, refers to a text that is eerily reminiscent of another, that produces the effect, in reading, of being *strangely familiar*, a kind of ‘shadow’ of a previous text. As Nicholas Royle states of his own work on ‘The Uncanny’: “this study is haunted by the many texts that have explicitly addressed the question of the uncanny” (Uncanny, 277). That is to say, although The Uncanny written by Nicholas Royle in 2003 has no direct connection with Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” written in 1919, they are inexorably bound together, one owing its very existence to the other, despite being different in its approach and

content. Such is the case, one could argue, between MacDiarmid's Lucky Poet, and Thomas's early political prose. The 'phantom-like' aspect is exacerbated by the fact that, as has been noted, Lucky Poet itself is heavily influenced by the work of many Welsh authors, greatly influencing MacDiarmid in his nationalist ideology – the very nationalist ideology that then subsequently influences Thomas. In another autobiographical volume, The Company I've Kept (1966), MacDiarmid states that: "If next to the last named [Patrick Geddes] I was asked who had made the profoundest impression of all upon me of all the men I have known I would say the Welsh Nationalist leader, Saunders Lewis."<sup>133</sup> Considering Saunders Lewis's impact on R.S. Thomas's thinking, and also their close, personal relationship, this further enhances the notion of a 'phantomic' connection between Thomas and MacDiarmid. It is yet further increased by the fact that Thomas makes no mention whatsoever in his prose of MacDiarmid's Welsh connections or influences. As Nicholas Royle argues, another feature of the 'phantom text' is "what it does *not* say, or says (perhaps) without saying" (Uncanny, 277). Despite the fact that Thomas, therefore, must have been aware of MacDiarmid's close links with Wales, it is as if he is claiming the comparison for himself, curiously omitting the fact that MacDiarmid had already made those connections for him. Ultimately, therefore, Thomas's writing on Scotland is in fact extremely revealing of Thomas himself. Thomas's insistence that all Welshmen should read Lucky Poet not only propounds a kind of 'ghostly' connection with MacDiarmid, but also suggests a kind of ghostly omission, in the fact that, surreptitiously, Thomas realised that MacDiarmid's work, in fact, *already concerned Wales*.

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One gets the impression from Thomas that there is a certain sense of *heimlich* in his reading of MacDiarmid, which succeeds in grounding him, and hauling him out of the abyss of non-belonging he experiences as part of the Anglo-Welsh movement. He moves from this unfamiliar world, within which he is never at ease, to the 'familiar' terrain of the vaster, Celtic and European community proposed by MacDiarmid, the 'homely' element of which enabled cultural connection – the feeling that he is not 'alone' but rather part of something vaster.

Undoubtedly, Thomas had encountered a similar sense of *heimlich* in his reading of other Celtic writers. On meeting Austin Clarke, and other Irish poets in Ireland in the late thirties, for example, Thomas states that "their company satisfied some urge within him at the time" (A, 45). Of W.B Yeats and Fiona Macleod he also remarks that "the two writers soon came to represent exactly the life that he would love to live among the peat and the heather on the west coast" (A, 45). One gets the feeling that these writers represented something that Thomas could not find elsewhere, and that he yet hoped to find, or develop, within Wales, that is, a simpler, more organic, and most importantly a culturally-rooted life. In addition, one gets a feeling of a deep emotional need to identify with writers not just outside Wales but outside, and beyond, England.

MacDiarmid represented not only cultural survival, but also colonial resistance. Throughout his work, MacDiarmid stressed the importance of the home, and the familiar terrain, intent on preserving the simple, natural, native life within comfortable surroundings. It is evident that this notion of belonging to a 'home-land' and to a simple way of life again inspired Thomas, for this was also a means of counteracting his own

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<sup>133</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, *The Company I've Kept: Essays in Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1966) 16.

sense of displacement at this time. When Thomas was asked to contribute to a tribute for MacDiarmid on his sixtieth birthday (which indicates that MacDiarmid must also have been aware of Thomas, at least on some level), what he wrote concentrated on this very aspect of familiarity and homeliness within MacDiarmid's work. "There are world-wide truths to be learned from staying at home," states Thomas, "and it is the discovery of dear, familiar things that provides the universal element in this poet's work."<sup>134</sup> Thomas evidently finds comfort in MacDiarmid's work, for the poetry *renders familiar* to him the universal; culture, for example, is not 'out-there' in any far-reaching sense but it is rather 'in-here,' within close proximity, part of one's *cynneddf*, to borrow John Cowper Powys's term. The "dear, familiar things" also become significant of a universal order, and are at the extreme pole from the uncanny experience.

Through a study of Lucky Poet's methodology, it is possible to see the ways in which Thomas's prose, and in particular the two prose pieces concerning Scotland, seem to mirror many of MacDiarmid's core objectives. In reading Lucky Poet, in the early forties, Thomas was manifestly seized by the possibilities of regenerating 'national' Welsh literature in English, and was inspired by MacDiarmid to urge the Welsh to develop a similar, essentially un-English literature. Thomas was also motivated, inevitably, to become a spokesperson (of sorts) for the proposed movement, and was specific in describing the kind of Welsh renaissance he hoped to see developing in lieu of the current literary trend of the 'Anglo-Welsh' writing, whose claims to authenticity he felt to be insubstantial. Subscribing to the 'Anglo-Welsh' school, for Thomas, was highly dissatisfying. It was to come face to face with criticism and questions concerning

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'authenticity.' If one was 'Anglo' at all, it seemed to denote that one was constructing a 'Welsh' identity artificially, and from the 'outside.' In "Anglo-Welsh Writing" (1952) he questions where the margins of definition lie: "What is it? Literature by Welsh people about Welsh things? Literature by English people about Wales? Or literature by Welsh people about any subject at all?" (SLPR, 41). Thomas was evidently uneasy about that which the identity 'represented' and was also preoccupied by the fact that it did not provide anything 'essentially' different, or anything that reacted *against*, or differed from, English writing by English authors. He goes on to say that "One can, no doubt, group such writers together to make a "school" but the sum of their contributions does not necessarily create a literature with a feel of its own to it." (SLPR, 51) It was this very notion of "a literature with a feel of its own to it," that Thomas saw being represented in the work of MacDiarmid and other 'Celtic' writers, hoping that their rationale could provide a cultural model.

MacDiarmid's use of the vernacular in fact *did* present Thomas with a model of cultural 'difference' that he believed could be of use to the Anglo-Welsh. Thomas began to consider the possibility that Anglo-Welsh writing could generate a culturally stimulating movement, becoming even "the product of the new age" (SLPR, 38). Hugh MacDiarmid, with his forceful Scottish identity, and his use of Scots, along with other branches of the vernacular, such as Synthetic Scots and Synthetic English, seemed proof enough that such a movement could succeed. This also provided Thomas with an active linguistic model of cultural belonging, an element of *heimlich* against the dissatisfying *unheimlich* feel of the present Anglo-Welsh situation. It also seemed possible that such a

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<sup>134</sup> R.S. Thomas, Preface to Hugh MacDiarmid. (Edinburgh: National Library of Scotland, 1967) 3.

movement could be engendered by a single writer for, as one commentator on MacDiarmid, Professor Ants Oras, remarked: “What is the individual language of one writer at the present moment may conceivably develop into the literary medium of a whole community” (LP, 21). Just as MacDiarmid sought to re-familiarise the cultural community with the vernacular through the use of Scots, Thomas hoped that the Anglo-Welsh ‘school’ could ‘bring the language back’ for the English-speaking Welsh through the use of similar linguistic and literary methods.

It is vital also to remember that “Hugh MacDiarmid” is a persona, the use of which is integral to the success of Lucky Poet. Christopher Murray Grieve created for himself the persona of ‘MacDiarmid’ in 1922, giving birth to a larger-than-life character who did not hesitate in putting forward his views about the superiority of Scottish culture, and of his own inestimable role in its progress. Throughout Lucky Poet, he focuses on his ‘inherent’ connection with the vernacular, and is consistently defiant when it comes to discussing the influence of the colonial tongue. He claims that he had been raised with “extreme anti-English feeling” (LP, 225) and that he has a “dislike and distrust of everything English” (LP, 80). As a result, he states that: “I discovered in myself in high degree that passion for linguistics which is so distinctively Scottish. . . . and so utterly un-English” (LP, 16) and that he can speak Scots “with far greater psychological satisfaction” (LP, 17). MacDiarmid also implies that it is the only language in which his ‘true’ self can be seen, stating of the Scots language that “its sounds . . . bring me fully alive”(LP, 35).

An existential rationale also informed MacDiarmid’s cultural ideology. MacDiarmid did not perceive life as a given, but rather as something that must be

constantly maintained and fought for. He writes: “My ambition was to be the creator of a new people, a real bard who ‘sang’ things till they ‘became,’ yet, as an individual, the incarnation of an immemorial culture. To live is to fight for life, Heraclitus said” (LP, 81). In this sense, MacDiarmid was intensely aware of himself as an individual, and also aware of his own ‘lone’ status in the universe, and therefore his individual responsibility towards the national collective. As John Baglow emphasises, there is a recurring theme of silence and absence in the poet’s work that “indicates MacDiarmid’s awareness that he is on his own and must proceed at his own risk without outside guidance.”<sup>135</sup> Here again, it is possible to see the attraction for R.S. Thomas of the individual striving in the name of the collective, determined to follow his own vision through to the end. “MacDiarmid,” Thomas states admiringly, “is an indomitable fighter. He is not to be daunted by the attacks of the enemy, be they insidious or ruthless” (SLPR, 30).

However, as MacDiarmid became increasingly aware of himself as a lone individual striving for national identity and control, this also meant that MacDiarmid adopted certain ‘cultural’ characteristics along the way. The natural trait needed in order to accompany this kind of individualism, according to MacDiarmid, was cultural arrogance, a complete and unyielding belief in one’s own ability and one’s own cultural superiority as a ‘Scot’. As MacDiarmid writes in Lucky Poet:

What Scotland needs above all else is a stiff dose of what  
my friend Oliver St. John Gogarty invokes to defeat the  
dirty little Firblogs, the Clumsy Louts in Eire - *eutrephelia*,

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<sup>135</sup> John Baglow, Hugh MacDiarmid: The Poetry of Self, (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press) 28.

well bred arrogance - the over-weening blue eye arched in  
the bony face. (LP, 236)

MacDiarmid sees arrogance – termed here as ‘eutrephelia’ – as essential in the nationalist struggle, a way of resisting colonisation and maintaining a strong, individual identity. MacDiarmid also uses this term elsewhere in Lucky Poet, endowing it with a slightly altered meaning. He states: “But then I always believed in what my friend Oliver Gogarty calls *eutrephilia*, relevant knowledge of any matter and having it immediately on tap, as it were” (LP, 14). There is evidently a connection between these varying definitions. To be arrogant, after all, is to assume superiority, and MacDiarmid’s superiority, throughout Lucky Poet, depends on his possessing vast amounts of knowledge. This further emphasises the fact that arrogance and intellectualism, for MacDiarmid, go hand in hand. One needs only to consider the following statement made by the Scottish poet:

I have never met anyone who has read anything like as much as I have, though I have known most of our great bookmen; and it is a common experience of mine to have professors and other specialists in this or that language or literature, or in subjects ranging from geology to cerebral localization or the physiological conditions of originality of thought, admit that I am far better read even in their own particular subjects than they are themselves. (LP, 13)

Although it is impossible to know how much of MacDiarmid’s claim is in fact true, this certainly manifests that intellectualism is an intrinsic component of MacDiarmid’s cultural ideology. He characterises himself as possessing “universal curiosity” (LP, 14)



and a thirst for knowledge, drawn to journalism because he “already knew the greatest lesson of journalism – that it is only ignorance which is boredom, and that everything is interesting and important if only you learn enough about it” (LP, 14). MacDiarmid therefore feels knowledge to be in some way a combative element with which one can fight the insecurities or instabilities of the surrounding world. If one ‘knows the world,’ then one cannot be manipulated or abused by it. He boasts to have read nearly every one of the hundreds of books in the Langholm library when he was a boy, and that acquiring a knowledge and understanding of other cultures and other political contexts enabled him to resist imperial influences. He cites American influence as being particularly formative: “It was certainly this early American reading that helped me to resist the refining influence of English education” (LP, 10).

As MacDiarmid consciously rejected all English influences, this also meant rejecting London life, and the literary values of a bourgeois, metropolitan society. Grieve was keen to emphasise his created ‘persona’ of MacDiarmid as standing aside from London trends and English writers, stating: “I have never cared a fig for London opinions on literary matter or anything else” (LP, 1). The ‘national’ writer was expected to define himself solely as “Scottish,” and in order to do so required extensive knowledge of his / her own tradition, culture and history, rather than of the colonising culture. The emphasis, therefore, lies on re-discovering that which is *already* familiar, on exploring one’s *cynneddf*, so to bring to light the information that can begin to shape one’s identity. If colonisation is that which renders the familiar *unfamiliar*, then there is, as MacDiarmid points out, a great deal of re-familiarisation that needs to take place in order to establish one’s identity. “I am afraid very few of us know much of our own country’ is a platitude

of which the present writer, for reasons not inscrutable, is the humble and constant recipient” (LP, 15), writes MacDiarmid, urging his compatriots to ‘belong’ knowledgeably to their own country. It is also MacDiarmid’s belief that such knowledge should be not only required of writers, but of all those who engage in a public ‘national’ life. He affirms:

I have long been of the opinion that at least Scottish Members of Parliament and Secretaries of State for Scotland and other high officials should have to do likewise; but public opinion seems dead against me.

(LP, 16)

In order to be ‘truly’ Scottish, therefore, one needed to be in possession of an all-encompassing knowledge of Scotland’s history and culture. It is this very same ‘knowledge’ that Saunders Lewis demands of the Welsh writer in his lecture “Is there an Anglo Welsh Literature?”, a lecture that considers the validity of the Anglo-Welsh movement as a separate organic cultural community. Sceptical of the movement’s authenticity, Lewis compares the situation in Wales unfavourably with that of the Anglo-Irish, one of the main differences being the extensive knowledge that informs Irish identity. Of the Anglo-Irish, Lewis states that:

A good part of their work has been the popularising of the work of Irish archaeologists and historians and literary researchers. Their aim was to restore the literary and social

traditions of the old Irish Ireland to the non-Irish speaking  
Ireland of their own day.<sup>136</sup>

Through researching its historical past, therefore, Ireland was able to evolve a sense of cultural identity that was distinctively Irish, although the native language was not spoken. Knowledge became a means of securing one's cultural identity when it was impractical to do so linguistically. It is with this in mind that Saunders Lewis questions the authenticity of the Anglo-Welsh movement, which, he argues, had not yet evolved a distinct national identity, but rather retained close links with the colonial tongue.

And yet, it was not only knowledge that one needed in order to be 'authentically' Scottish or Welsh in MacDiarmid's eyes, but also a set of values that conformed to his own individual social expectations. MacDiarmid emphasises his working-class roots relentlessly in Lucky Poet, stating that "For many generations . . . my forebears have belonged to the working class, and I would not have it otherwise if I could" (LP, 225). In fact, MacDiarmid demonstrates the kind of hostility towards bourgeois identity that R.S. Thomas had been feeling for several years towards himself, that to "to speak English was to 'speak fine' i.e. to ape the gentry and the very thought of anything of the sort was intolerable" (LP, 17). For MacDiarmid, himself a fervent Socialist (and later, Communist) Nationalist, class issues could not be separated from one's sense of national identity, to the point of believing that being upper-class in fact prevents the individual from belonging to a cultural collective. MacDiarmid proudly boasts: "I had not to scrap or transform any part of myself which by education was antagonistically *bourgeoise*, because I had been on the alert from the very start and had never developed any such

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<sup>136</sup> Saunders Lewis, "Is There an Anglo-Welsh Literature?" (Being the Annual Lecture Delivered to the Branch on December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1938). (Urdd Graddedigion PC Cangen Caerdydd, 1939) 7-8.

part” (LP, 231). The writer’s place, according to MacDiarmid, was among the people, and “any assimilation to the . . . *bourgeois* society as a whole, involves intolerable detriment to any artist” (LP, 184).

Thomas, having already begun to feel uneasy about his own bourgeois roots during his years in Chirk and Hanmer, now placed himself firmly on MacDiarmid’s side, increasingly aware of the intricate connection between class and cultural identity. MacDiarmid’s stance “reminds us of that large body of Welsh people,” writes Thomas, “who have willingly surrendered their age-old customs and traditions for the bric a brac of bourgeois existence in houses indistinguishable from English suburbia” (SLPR, 31), and who have, as a result, renounced their ‘native’ character. Following MacDiarmid’s lead, Thomas despairs at such a way of life, advocating in its place a simple, rural life away from the bourgeois influence of English colonisation. He desired no less than a “winnowing and purifying of the people” (SLPR, 33), a language “purified of all English phrases, catchwords, and such like” (SLPR, 29) as well as an ability to “change the people and lead them to their essential dignity” (SLPR, 33).

This perhaps singles out one of MacDiarmid’s many contradictions, a contradiction that is also characteristic of R.S. Thomas. Despite MacDiarmid’s insistence, for example, that the writer needed to be among-the-people and, in the working-class sense, to be also *of the people*, it is debatable whether or not he himself complied with this ethic. By the time he published Lucky Poet in 1943, MacDiarmid was quite literally *unheimlich*, as he had become, primarily in a political (but also in a literary and cultural) sense, a Scottish exile. He was expelled from the National Party of Scotland, of which he was a founder member, in 1933, and went on to join the Communist Party, being also

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expelled from this party in 1938. Following his first expulsion, he moved to the isle of Whalsay in Shetland with his family, where he remained for nine years. He considered himself victim of the “outcast condition, the freezing out process” (LP, 42), and felt a great unease, during the thirties, with the English influences exerted over much of the Scottish literature of the period. Additionally, he saw the National Party of Scotland, subsequent to his expulsion, as completely inadequate, and claimed to be “wholly and implacably opposed to it and to almost all of its leading personnel” (LP, 43). Living in the Shetlands, however, according to MacDiarmid “involve[d] an ex-patriation all the more exasperating because it is a case of ‘so near – and yet so far” (LP, 41). Although he was, at least geographically, close to the ‘true’ Scotland, he was also unable to be fully engaged in its cultural and political life, despite his apparent need to “get in amongst them [the Scottish people] . . . to interest them in better work, to give them better standards” (LP, 6).

His expulsion from both parties, and subsequent move to Whalsay, suggests that it was near-impossible for MacDiarmid to be part of any collective at all. As Peter Berresford Ellis writes of MacDiarmid in The Celtic Dawn, “MacDiarmid was an individualist, a man of numerous social, political and even cultural contradictions, who did not find it easy to work within any one movement or group.”<sup>137</sup> In his long poem “The Kind of Poetry I Want” MacDiarmid exposes his unease with the notion that ‘being’ also entails being-in-the-world-with-others:

To exist is to be-in-the-world, to be caught. . .  
 Moreover, I must share this world with ‘others’  
 I must come against other existences  
 Similar to my own. I must adjust myself  
 To their rhythms, or impose my own on them.

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<sup>137</sup> Peter Berresford Ellis, The Celtic Dawn (London: Constable, 1993) 85.

I must lose or find myself in them. . . .  
 . . . The world of existence is a common world.  
 To-be-in-the-world implies  
 To-be-along-with-others: Co-existence. (LP, 164)

Here MacDiarmid reflects upon the existential condition of “being-in-the-world.” It is a notion originally proposed by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger,<sup>138</sup> as the means through which one can begin to conceive of one’s existence – *dasein* – precisely as being-in-the-world, and to be-in-the-world-with-others, having also to define oneself in relation to others. MacDiarmid expresses this as a limitation, it is “to be caught,” to be restricted, even. And what is perhaps most interesting about this short extract it that, for MacDiarmid, the existence of others is perturbing. He is almost threatened by the prospect of ‘familiar’ selves: “I must come against other existences / Similar to my own,” and here again encapsulates a great contradiction in himself and R.S. Thomas. Although MacDiarmid claims he wishes to be among-the-people, in the same way Thomas, perhaps, wishes to be one of *y werin*, the two poets are not people who are naturally at ease in the company of others. MacDiarmid, in fact, seems at a loss to know exactly what the function of the ‘self’ is around others, exploring the ambiguity of the situation: “I must adjust myself / To their rhythms, or impose my own on them. / I must lose or find myself in them” (LP, 164). It seems to suggest that he is, in fact, unsettled in the company of others, a notion further reinforced by MacDiarmid’s confession that: “I have always been extremely chary of intimacy, making many acquaintances but very, very few real friends” (LP, 19).

In light of MacDiarmid’s belief that he was, in fact, not part of a collective (as he would often like his readers to believe) but consciously standing, as R.S. Thomas would

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have it, “a little to one side,” a ‘lone’ individual, Thomas’s 1960s poem “A Welshman at St. James’s Park” comes to mind. In this poem, that M. Wynn Thomas has argued is a direct response to the Kirkegaardian ideal of the individual versus the ‘public,’<sup>139</sup> it is possible to see how Thomas is equally uneasy as he contemplates his relationship with the ‘common’ collective of Britain:

I am invited to enter these gardens  
 As one of the public, and to conduct myself  
 In accordance with the regulations;  
 To keep off the grass and sample flowers  
 Without touching them; to admire birds  
 That have been seduced from wildness by  
 Bread they are pelted with.

I am not one  
 Of the public; I have come a long way  
 To realise it. (WA, 28)

While the poem, as Wynn Thomas has pointed out, evidently has its root in thoughts of cultural identity, that is, Thomas realises that he cannot become part of a specifically “British” public, it also manifests Thomas’s unease at being considered alongside others, being-in-the-world-with-others. He must retain his individuality, his aloneness, his separate nature, much in the same way that MacDiarmid must preserve his. Thomas, here, has no interest in the artificial, indistinct world designated for the eyes of the ‘public,’ he wishes rather to remain true to his own individual vision, longing for a rural life amidst the heather.

If one is to accept this reading of both Thomas and MacDiarmid as ill-at-ease with others around them, this further complicates their desire to be considered, MacDiarmid

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<sup>138</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1962) First published 1927.

<sup>139</sup> See M. Wynn Thomas, “Agweddau ar farddoniaeth y chwedegau,” *Y Cawr Awenydd*, (Llandysul: Gomer, 1990) 31-32.

perhaps more so than R.S. Thomas, as any kind of national spokesperson or leader. Perhaps the inevitable outcome of assuming such a position of authority *is* to run the risk of appearing didactic and derisive, thus further alienating the people rather than bringing them closer. It is also possible that both consciously adopt personas that allow them to maintain their distance from the 'public,' that is, their concrete, oftentimes unfavourable views perhaps making them *seem* unapproachable. Both writers, however, wished to enrich the lives of the cultural collective, and to also strengthen the idea of a cultural community by means of their work. MacDiarmid wanted to be "the *creator* of a new people" (LP, 81), while R.S. Thomas, in believing "that the mantle of writers like T.Gwynn Jones and W.J. Gruffydd is falling not upon the younger Welsh writers, but upon those of us who express ourselves in the English tongue" (SLPR, 26), also felt responsible for developing cultural awareness within Wales.

MacDiarmid believed it to be the responsibility of the people, and above all the writers of Scotland, to revolt against the prevailing Anglo-Scottish status quo, and felt it absolutely vital to be brutally honest about the internal failings of Scotland and the Scottish people, even to the point of notoriety. He laments that out of "practically every writer and public man and woman in Scotland of any reputation or influence to-day" there are only four (including himself – he does not specify the others) who "can possibly be regarded as 'ceaseless born fighters, swords not to be sheathed'" (LP, 236). He berates also what he terms the "general anti-intellectualism of Scottish writers" (LP, 283), referring also to Scotland as "The tragedy of an unevolved people" (LP, 296). MacDiarmid was unafraid to sacrifice popularity for what he saw as the "greater cause" of nationalism, of Scotland's truer, more culturally authentic self. The fact that



MacDiarmid quotes Kierkegaard in this context, in stating that: “One is unpopular if one thinks one’s thoughts out to the bitter end” (LP, 100), also makes a direct link to the existentialist stance of R.S. Thomas. To the “bitter end” is evidently where MacDiarmid *and* R.S. Thomas are prepared to go. In Lucky Poet MacDiarmid quotes one of his critics as saying: “Scotland having had in Burns a great popular poet, Mr MacDiarmid thinks it is high time it had – in himself – a great unpopular poet for a change!” (LP, 78) MacDiarmid, in choosing to include this quotation in his autobiography, is evidently eager to cement his subversive nature as a poet, to stress the necessity, for himself as a creative artist, to express ideas that, although contentious, are at least true to his own character.

And yet, the very fact that MacDiarmid must include a quotation from one of his critics in order to make this point, rather than relate this in his own words, testifies to the curious nature of Lucky Poet as an autobiography. It is, like Thomas’s autobiography Neb, a book that, contrary to the expectations of a conventional autobiography, is continually evasive when it comes to personal detail. It claims, after all, to be “the Autobiography of Hugh MacDiarmid” and not “Christopher Murray Grieve,” and therefore is by nature *artificial*, an analysis of the public ‘persona’ of the constructed identity. The constant references to quotations by other writers ‘about’ himself, for example, imply that MacDiarmid would rather perpetuate a ‘general’ external opinion than reveal any additional personal material. Long quotations, extensive lists of writers’ names, and political dogma constitute the main bulk of Lucky Poet, while the biographical detail is scant, again suggesting that it is the persona of MacDiarmid, and

the various responses to that persona, that Grieve wants his reader to contemplate. He conveys this notion explicitly in his introduction:

This book is accordingly an account of the development of my mind, 'absorbed in its own forked speculation', or, more precisely, of what Jung would call my *persona*, defined as 'the private conception a man has of himself, his idea of what he wants to be and of how he wants other people to take him.'

(LP, xxvi)

It is not, therefore, as any reader would anticipate, a portrayal of "Hugh MacDiarmid" through factual presentation, but merely MacDiarmid *as he wished to be taken*. Having declared this, however, MacDiarmid, like R.S. Thomas, is implicitly accountable for those facts that he has *chosen* to include in his autobiography and it is worth considering exactly what it is MacDiarmid hoped to represent within this autobiographical volume.

Despite asking "Who am I that I should write an autobiography?" (LP, 175) Lucky Poet is geared towards justifying this very enterprise. In order to reinforce his authority – cultural, political and literary – within the mass of the Scottish public and literary circles, MacDiarmid frequently quotes a number of his critics, selecting primarily those excerpts focusing on his 'genius' in the field of Scots literature. He quotes one critic as saying that MacDiarmid has "managed to create what is practically a new language" and has "succeeded in writing poetry of genius in that medium" (LP, 21). Another passage reads: "A poet of genius with wide intellectual interests...I find scarcely any contemporary poet so intellectually exciting as Mr. MacDiarmid" (LP, 66). "Mr MacDiarmid is one of those aggravatingly gifted people," writes another, where one goes

as far as to claim that “Mr Hugh MacDiarmid is a national institution” (LP, 73). There is no doubt, therefore, that they have been selected with the purpose of heightening MacDiarmid’s sense of intellectualism and poetic ability.

To view Lucky Poet as merely an act of self-promotion would be, however, to misconstrue its strategy. As Stephen P. Smith suggests in his essay “Hugh MacDiarmid’s Lucky Poet: Autobiography and the Art of Attack,”<sup>140</sup> critics have often failed to recognise the complexities of the self revealed in Lucky Poet:

*Lucky Poet*, like much of MacDiarmid’s vast output of prose, has received scant critical attention from MacDiarmid’s admirers and detractors alike, a state of affairs which has relegated the prose to the critical supporting role of commentary on or intellectual context for the poetry. In doing so, we have failed to recognize an intrinsically valuable body of work written by one of the great polemicists of the western world.<sup>141</sup>

Smith implies that both the style in which it is delivered, and the over-boasted superiority it exemplifies can be taken into account as part of the way in which MacDiarmid emphasises the cultural authority of his ‘persona’ - the only way, possibly, in which his ‘message’ can be delivered. He goes on to demonstrate how MacDiarmid’s autobiography can be defined rather as oratory, making the point that there is in the text “an acute sense of self-importance leading to the impulse to teach, to preach, to convert

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<sup>140</sup> Stephen P. Smith, “Autobiography and the Art of Attack,” Hugh MacDiarmid: Man and Poet, ed. Nancy Gish (Edinburgh and Maine: Edinburgh University Press and University of Maine National Poetry Foundation, 1992) 275.

<sup>141</sup> Smith 275.

to a strongly held belief or principle of living.”<sup>142</sup> This was also meant as a means of self-fulfilling prophecy, in the sense that the prose, as Smith suggests:

creates a persona who, whether “true” or not to historical facts, represents a sympathetic protagonist with whom the creative “I”, the controlling ego of the present autobiographical act, can forge an instructional bond. Such was “I”; such “I” have become as a result.<sup>143</sup>

Depending on the facts therefore becomes redundant, the strategy here is to emphasise the position of authority achieved by MacDiarmid, the authority itself being activated by the style in which he writes. MacDiarmid, in this sense, never stops constructing himself. It is an ongoing process and he must relentlessly stress who he is, and largely in terms of how he is perceived by others. Again, the great paradox lies in the fact that his constant reference to literary and political acquaintances locates him within a community of writers, within a tradition, and also within a cultural collective.

And yet this, in turn, allows MacDiarmid, perhaps quite deliberately, to mask his more personal, intimate character. He quotes Paul Valéry in saying that ‘the ordinary biography affords no indication of what a man is like . . . the deeper part of him . . . the true index of human character is omitted’ (LP, 33). Through saying this, it becomes evident that MacDiarmid *intends* for his autobiography to be elusive, so that he may then make the wider point that “For such an essential and inner history of myself I would have had to use Scots” (LP, 33). In his words, it is a book “of a less ambitious kind: it is not

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<sup>142</sup> Smith 278

<sup>143</sup> Smith 278.

designed (though doubtless, I will 'give myself away' in it completely enough) to afford personal revelation so much as to serve certain practical purposes" (LP, 34).

Bearing in mind Stephen Smith's analysis of Lucky Poet as self-construction, "Such was 'I'; such 'I' have become as a result," it is also possible to view MacDiarmid as a poet of deep-rooted insecurity. That is, the very tactic he uses in order to continually stress his own 'strength of character' ultimately reflects feelings of inadequacy. It is the reverse, in a way, of what both R.S. Thomas and Freud are doing in using the third person narrative.<sup>144</sup> Through having an overblown sense of his own significance, he ultimately exposes the fact that he is plagued by the threat of *insignificance*. In many ways, his attempt to define himself in terms of his cultural identity, as "the great national poet of Scotland," (LP, 3) "a Scottish Gael / Of earth's subtlest speech" (LP, 117), is a means, perhaps, of counteracting his own alienation, his own weak sense of self. Certainly this is the view put forth by John Baglow who, in his study of the poet, explores how Scottishness can be seen as a kind of tactical move on behalf of the poet to resolve these disturbing elements of his identity:

The Scottish theme reflects his abiding concern with who and what he is. MacDiarmid grapples with his plight by insisting, over and over, that it is possible to resolve it. This possibility is crucial, but it is not a certainty to MacDiarmid, and this is revealed by the repetition which

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<sup>144</sup> See Chapter 2 of this thesis, 37.

characterizes his pronouncements, a continual reaffirmation  
of what he always insists is true anyway.<sup>145</sup>

As Baglow here suggests, MacDiarmid is indeed aware of the possibility of unity and a distinct identity and yet the only way in which it can truly be kept in focus is through a continual and arduous re-emphasis. In other words, his exploration and construction of Scottish identity is inextricably linked to his struggle to establish a stable *personal* identity. This has also been argued, of course, of R.S. Thomas. As Grahame Davies writes in his study Sefyll yn y Bwlch, a comparative study of R.S. Thomas, Saunders Lewis, T.S. Eliot and Simone Weil, Thomas's "Welshness" was also a means of channelling his spiritual search for meaning, an attempt to give significance to his own individual identity. Davies suggests that, for R.S. Thomas, "culture is a means of arriving at the truth,"<sup>146</sup> his cultural identity, like MacDiarmid's, being a means of escape from the threat of non-entity.

In light of the more personal element of the poet's national identity, it is perhaps now appropriate to turn to Thomas's direct response to MacDiarmid's thinking, in terms of two prose pieces concerning Scotland, "Some Contemporary Scottish Writing" (1946) and "A Welsh View of the Scottish Renaissance" (1948). Both prose pieces in question were published in Keidrych Rhys's *Wales*, and there is a sense in which Thomas was also bringing the 'wider' Celtic context to the attention of the 'Anglo-Welsh' writers for whom 'Wales' had become a sounding board for ideas of national and cultural identity. In "Some Contemporary Scottish Writing," for example, Thomas celebrates the fact that

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<sup>145</sup> Baglow 35.

Scottish literature undermines the assumption that 'Celtic' literature is a strain of English literature. While Thomas had feared "whether, like too many of our own writers, they would simply be limping along in the rear of Eliot, Auden, and company limited" (SLPR, 29), he found, to the contrary, an uplifting originality and distinction within the work of Scottish writers. The Scots vernacular, in particular, he viewed as having a suitable temperament of 'resistance.' He notes that it "has about it an air of fierceness which makes it peculiarly apt for the expression of *saeva indignatio*," (SLPR, 30) precisely the kind of *saeva indignatio* Thomas feels is needed in order to reinvigorate the Anglo-Welsh movement.

MacDiarmid seems to have made Thomas acutely aware of "the need for politics, distasteful as they may appear" (SLPR, 30) and also for a need for a "defensive patriotism" (SLPR, 31), that entailed rejecting English influence, and evolving a literature whose content "takes us far back before the Saxon Invasion" (SLPR, 25). Scots also appealed to Thomas as its Celtic 'peculiarity' tended towards non-urban, rural society. It was poetry that was developed away from the kind of élite circles that MacDiarmid despised in London society, the "so-called progressive writers." Thomas therefore saw the importance of aligning the poetry with his *own* specific set of social values, which were not dissimilar to MacDiarmid's. That is, if it was 'Welsh' writing, then it followed that it was rural, non-metropolitan, and somehow symptomatic and representative of *y werin bobl*, the Welsh 'folk'.

What appeared particularly appealing to Thomas was the fact that one could, through educating oneself culturally and re-familiarising oneself with the vernacular,

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<sup>146</sup> Grahame Davies, *Sefyll yn y Bwlch* (Caerdydd: Gwasg Prifysgol Cymru, 1999) 169. My translation.

come into contact with other languages and cultures, expanding and strengthening one's cultural identity in the process. MacDiarmid's influential insistence on knowledge and a breadth of linguistic reference also captures Thomas's attention:

The work of MacDiarmid's younger admirers and compatriots in familiarizing themselves with many tongues and a wide learning, whilst at the same time turning for inspiration to local material, is nothing less than a fulfillment of J.R. Lowell's requirement, "the tongue of the people in the mouth of the scholar. (SLPR, 31)

Thomas's admiration of the 'scholarly' nature of national identity, to be able to reflect, in one's writing, the "dear, familiar things," but also to do so with intellectual rigour, again links back with MacDiarmid's thinking. Bearing in mind MacDiarmid's belittling of Scots writers as lacking 'passionate' nationalism – "half glow-worms, half newts" (LP, 149) – it is interesting that Thomas too attacks the temperament of 'national writing.' He states that: "Scots has . . . a brow quality in keeping with its environment which makes one wonder why in equally stern surroundings so much modern Welsh writing is jingling and sweet" (SLPR, 31). Again, as in the case of MacDiarmid, the stress is on the lack of vitality in such writing, the fear that the poetry produced does not reflect *living* culture. "There are people living under the harsh crags of Cader Idris and Yr Wyddfa, or on the bare gaunt moorland of central Wales, but their verse is tame to the point of lifelessness," writes Thomas (SLPR, 33). R.S. Thomas's evidently believes that 'national' writing, in some way, should be of the same character as the land in which it is produced, that is, that the 'harsh crags' or 'bare gaunt moorland' should in some way be characterised by

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the very language used. Once more, such a belief reflects the notion of the “magical peculiarity” that belongs, or *should belong*, to native culture and subsequently, native literature, in the eyes of both Thomas and MacDiarmid.

MacDiarmid is not the only Scottish writer, however, who interests R.S. Thomas, as he manifests a particular admiration for those who wrote exclusively in the Gaelic tongue, in particular George Campbell Hay and Sorley Maclean.<sup>147</sup> Once more, it is their animate style, their reflection of a *living* culture, that is commended, “two poets at least who, whilst being fully alive to the present situation, have yet found that they can best express themselves in the old language of their people” (SLPR, 33). They are able to do so without subscribing to the Anglicised ‘trend’ of urban life and mechanisation, of yielding to the seemingly ‘lifeless’ end of culture. This serves as a reminder that Thomas harbours similar MacDiarmidian distaste for “all things English”:

For it is England, the home of the industrial revolution, and the consequent twentieth-century rationalism, that have been the winter on our native pastures, and we must break their grip, and the grip of all the quislings and yes-men before we can strike that authentic note. (SLPR, 29)

Not only is Anglicisation seen here as detrimental to the evolvment of ‘authenticity,’ (again Thomas plays with the notion that one is not really ‘alive’ culturally if one is under the influence of England) but also considers the ‘Welsh’ character to be dormant, “waiting for the leaders who are great and fearless enough to awaken it to that enlargement of national consciousness” (SLPR, 32). In one way, it is perhaps possible

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<sup>147</sup> Sorley Maclean was, in fact, a personal friend of his.

that Thomas himself sees himself as a potential leader in this context, or, at least, one who is able to instruct through the means of his poetry and political prose. He is determined, in this sense, to follow MacDiarmid's example: ". . . we should do the same, for as MacDiarmid affirms . . . Scotland, Ireland, and Wales are still a people, 'a people full of remoteness, uncertainty and hope,' as he would see them" (SLPR, 33). It is this very uncertainty, perhaps, that poses the challenge, encouraging both MacDiarmid *and* R.S. Thomas to seize upon it in order to develop distinct, clear notions of cultural identity, based on their own personal ideology, an ideology, ultimately, of cultural survival, of perpetual hope. In "A Welsh View of the Scottish Renaissance," for example, published two years later, Thomas cites what he considers to be MacDiarmid's most effective motif of cultural resistance and survival:

The rose of all the world is not for me,  
I want for my part  
Only the little white rose of Scotland  
That smells sharp and sweet – and breaks the heart.<sup>148</sup>

Here is a multifarious image, which is, like Yeats's Cathleen ni Houlihan, referred to in a later text by Thomas, "purer than a tall candle before the holy rood" (CorW? 9), inspirational as a spiritual symbol of cultural difference. It stands as an alternative to the mechanised, urban society, corresponding simultaneously with Thomas's own vision of travelling "a little to one side" (CorW? 12) while expressing MacDiarmid's notion of the "dear, familiar" space. At the same time it also represents suffering, and recalls Kierkegaard's concept of the artist as "one who suffers", the colonised subject also being a victim of such subjugation. The image of the rose also subverts English colonialist

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<sup>148</sup> R.S. Thomas, "A Welsh View" 601.

ideology (“The rose of all the world is not for me”) and develops a distinctive symbol of national preservation and survival, while also stressing MacDiarmid’s individual claim that he is ‘beyond’ colonialism.

Thomas also uses a recurrent adversarial symbol within his own poetry which, like MacDiarmid’s “white rose,” signals cultural difference, one derived from a Welsh literary source. The recurrent motif is that of Rhiannon’s birds, a symbol taken from the *Mabinogi*, a collection of medieval Welsh tales written down in the thirteenth century, springing from years of folklore and story-telling. These birds appear in the second branch of the *Mabinogi*, as part of the tale of “Branwen Daughter of Llŷr.” Here, they become symbols of cultural authenticity and a soothing, magical presence, entertaining the men who have returned, disheartened, from battle. As an English translation reads, “three birds appeared and began to sing, and all the singing they [the men who had returned from battle] had ever heard was nothing compared to this.”<sup>149</sup> The birds become a symbol of an other-worldly presence, and yet one that is able to recharge and reinvigorate the national spirit, however disillusioned those ‘natives’ may be at the time.

In Thomas’s poetry, as Jason Walford Davies has argued in his study *Gororau’r Iaith: R.S. Thomas a’r Traddodiad Llenyddol Cymraeg*, “Rhiannon’s Birds...often *clearly reflect the state of the nation*,”<sup>150</sup> (GI, 256. *My translation*) and they are also, presumably, revealing of his relationship with that nation. On the one hand they can be considered as a symbol of Thomas’s relationship with Wales and Welsh culture, while on the other they become a symbol of regeneration and repair in face of mechanisation and

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<sup>149</sup> Jerry Gantz trans. *The Mabinogion*, (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1976) 80-81.

Anglicisation, providing Thomas with an escape from his own English values. In the poem “The Tree (Owain Glyndwr Speaks),” for example, Rhiannon’s birds represent a moment of cultural ‘purity,’ a moment at which

For one brief hour the summer came  
To the tree’s branches and we heard  
In the green shade Rhiannon’s birds  
Singing tirelessly as the streams  
That pluck glad tunes from the grey stones  
Of Powys of the broken hills. (AL, 19)

Here the birds appear as a symbol of rejuvenation and cultural promise, as a means of bringing light and colour in contrast to the “grey stones” of the “broken hills,” restoring ‘natural’ sound to the scene. In referring to Owain Glyndŵr’s revolt, the birds also celebrate a brief moment free of colonial oppression, one that had been fought for. In this sense, it also corresponds precisely to MacDiarmid’s ideology, that is, of choosing to reflect moments that are free (however temporarily) from colonial rule, and that reflect cultural identity at its most ‘pure’ and uncontaminated.

Thomas also chooses, at times, *not* to hear the sound of the birds, and the silence becomes symptomatic of the progressive Anglicisation that threatens his identity and the existence of his idealised Welsh community. Within the context of the ‘modern,’ industrialised world, the birds have no place, and they are signified rather by the haunting absence of their singing. In the poem, “He is sometimes contrary,” for example, their ‘refusal’ to sing is seen as a reaction to the cultural and spiritual lifelessness of the world around them:

God, in this light this  
country is a brittle  
instrument laid on one side

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<sup>150</sup> Jason Walford Davies, *Gororau'r Iaith* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003). My translation. Further references will be given parenthetically in the text (GI).

by one people, taken up  
 by another to play their twanged  
 accompaniment upon it, to which  
 the birds of Rhiannon  
 are refusing to sing. (WA, 49)

The silence of Rhiannon's birds here symbolises the death of a living tongue and a living culture, the birds' chatter muted by the "twanged / accompaniment" of Anglicisation. Thomas thus shows how the cultural motif can also be used in a negative context (it is worth remembering that the 'little white rose' also 'breaks the heart'). Thomas seems eternally hopeful that the birds of Rhiannon will be heard, however deadly and threatening the silence, however 'dormant' the sound may be. Again, uncertainty is a crucial factor, and one is reminded, yet again, of MacDiarmid's statement that the Scottish are a people full of "uncertainty and hope." Uncertainty of whether or not the birds will sing becomes synonymous with Thomas and MacDiarmid's ongoing construction of identity, their incessant need to keep struggling with self-definition.

The "little white rose" also represented for Thomas a much-needed anti-industrial, organic kind of nationalism that could be made applicable to Wales, one concerned with re-establishing spiritual, rather than materialist values. MacDiarmid urged the Scottish *people to obtain, as he himself had through his own work, a "broad national understanding and informed regenerative purpose"* (LP, 283) coupled with an awareness of their surroundings, "to draw . . . largely upon the Scottish landscape." (LP, 310) In opposition to this, MacDiarmid is aware of the bourgeois existence that ruins the cultural persona, and warns against "any *bourgeois* form of life . . . 'getting on' and 'making good.'" He also implores the Scottish to be "profoundly suspicious of any settled mode of life" (LP, 13), for such a way of life inevitably suggests colonisation. R.S. Thomas

subsequently became concerned that Wales itself was becoming “settled” in this way, the “public” succumbing to frivolous, vacuous activity, destroying what he perceived as the ‘traditional,’ ‘authentic’ way of life. For him, such activity was morally degenerative:

We have seen in Wales what does happen when we forget our land and our God and go a-whoring after false Gods. Instead of the rich cultural life of *yr hendre*, we get whist-drives and dances the winter through; instead of the satisfying life of *yr hafod*, we get the subsidy drawers in the lowlands paying occasional visits in their cars to the hill flocks and herds.<sup>151</sup>

Thomas here manifests disgust with the rootlessness of culture, as it succumbs to materialism, the identity fading as the houses (that seem to symbolise “the rich cultural life”) go to waste. Here is, in its essence, the *unheimlich* condition of culture, which is further heightened as Thomas quotes William Soutar’s reference to “the old house that must be built up again.”<sup>152</sup> The cultural life constituted by *yr hendre*, and “the satisfying life” of *yr hafod*, is temporarily lost.

The language, of course, the use of the vernacular, certainly for MacDiarmid, is also integral in repairing and completing the rural ideal. While in 1946, in “Some Contemporary Scottish Writing” Thomas affirmed the Welsh language’s “inadequacy as a medium for expressing the complex phantasmagoria of modern life” (SLPR, 33), by 1948, he has already begun to see difficulty and contradiction in this. Thomas, unlike MacDiarmid, faces the problem that Welsh is not his ‘mother’ tongue, and therefore, he

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<sup>151</sup> Thomas, “A Welsh View” 600.

cannot, like MacDiarmid, claim to be “distinctively Scottish [Welsh] . . . and so utterly un-English” (LP, 16), but must wrestle also with his English, colonial identity. He states, of Anglo-Welsh writers in general, that:

we are beginning to realise that the dilemma of belonging to one race whilst trying to express ourselves in the language of another is as intolerable as pretending that our needs, our aims and our standards should be the same.<sup>153</sup>

Here is an uncanny/unhomely sentiment – “belonging to one race whilst trying to express ourselves in the language of another” – and the psychological impact of being not-at-home in one’s language, for Thomas at least, is “intolerable.” It is no wonder, therefore, that he talks in terms of a revolt: “What are needed are well-planned sorties to drive the enemy out of her barely consolidated footholds in the hill country. She is welcome to the rest.”<sup>154</sup> The only way in which R.S. Thomas can counter this intolerable feeling is to re-emphasise his Welsh identity, and to aspire to a rooted, culturally authentic identity in order to repudiate the Anglicised, colonised identity he already, woefully, has. It is a specifically *rural* identity that Thomas wishes for once again, he wishes to re-awaken the ‘backwater’ of the country and to transform it into the national and spiritual ideal. It is, above all, following Scotland’s example, a renaissance that is needed in order to restore such ‘native’ identity. Towards the end of the article he states:

So in Wales Helen is Branwen or Nest, and if we would  
find Pair Dadeni the cauldron of rebirth, we must seek

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<sup>152</sup> Thomas, “A Welsh View” 601.

<sup>153</sup> Thomas, “A Welsh View” 601.

again in our own nation, at the roots of our own family  
tree.<sup>155</sup>

Thomas's familial reference here is interesting, and also evokes another, more covert comparison with Hugh MacDiarmid. While Thomas is evidently referring to the family of Welsh-speaking Wales here, there is also a manifest frustration with his *own* familial connections and the way in which his family, and his familial choices, have prevented his cultural/linguistic identity from developing. While his mother's influence over his identity has been well-documented (Thomas, after all, being unable to 'choose' his mother) the above quotation, especially the poet's fantasised Branwen and Nest, perhaps also suggest Thomas's frustration, from a cultural viewpoint, with his own marriage. In 1940 the poet had married the artist Mildred Eldridge, an English-speaking woman from an English, bourgeois background, and it would appear that Thomas was already beginning to feel uneasy about having made this choice. A few years later, in 1952, R.S. Thomas wrote to the Welsh author Islwyn Ffowc Elis. This was primarily a letter of admiration of the author's work, urging him not to waste his literary resources, and to fulfil his potential as an author. During the course of the letter, however, Thomas includes the curious detail: "Welsh is your first language and your wife is a Welsh-speaking woman. You can therefore live a 'normal' life."<sup>156</sup>

This is an interesting suggestion, and certainly throws light upon Thomas's mention of the 'Branwens' and 'Nests' of Wales, those whom he has *not* married, and whom he perhaps wishes he had. In addition, Thomas also includes, in his essay, a poem

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<sup>154</sup> Thomas, "A Welsh View" 602.

<sup>155</sup> Thomas, "A Welsh View" 604.



by Huw Dafï that warns against the cultural detriment of an English marriage: “Cais ferch addfain ugainmlwydd / Ac na chais ferch Sais o’r swydd” (SLPR, 32) (a line Thomas translates as “Take as your wife one of our slim twenty-year olds, / and not the offspring of a paid English official” SLPR 35). The “lanky limb of the Englishwoman,” as Dafï / Thomas states, has no place within the “paradise of our brothers” (SLPR, 35).

This implied tension Thomas felt between his ‘chosen’ lifestyle, and his desired cultural/linguistic identity, also echoes a claim made by MacDiarmid during the course of Lucky Poet. MacDiarmid writes:

I could never, by any possibility, have had anything to do with an English girl, but married first of all a Scots girl of old Highland descent, and as my second wife a Cornish girl, symbolizing the further development of my pro-Celtic ideas. (LP, 7)

MacDiarmid here is almost clinical in ‘choosing’ his partner, or at least, in hindsight, can claim his personal choices to have been influenced by his cultural identity, a strategic move in order to develop his “pro-Celtic” ideas. Given how familiar R.S. Thomas was with Lucky Poet, it indeed seems revealing that his confession to Islwyn Ffowc Elis (an entirely voluntary one at that) that his life, in comparison, was somehow ‘abnormal’ because of his wife’s background, and his reference to the Huw Dafï poem, should have come at the time it did. This also casts light on Thomas’s reference to the ‘cauldron of rebirth.’ Ultimately, what Thomas seems to be suggesting here is that he wishes to create

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<sup>156</sup> A letter sent by R.S. Thomas to Islwyn Ffowc Elis, dated 22 September 1952. NLW. I am grateful to T. Robin Chapman for drawing this letter to my attention.

himself anew, perhaps to free himself from the 'responsibility' of his English-speaking wife, whose very presence, through no fault of her own, hinders his cultural identity.

This is one of many discrepancies between the ideal Thomas proposed, and the actuality of life as he could live it, for he, like MacDiarmid before him, often found it impossible to live the exact same rooted, culturally authentic life that he proposed. Thomas also found other aspects of MacDiarmid's (and subsequently his own) ideology difficult to fulfil. For all his championing of the vernacular, it remains debatable, for example, whether or not Thomas was in fact able to develop any kind of similar linguistic pattern within his work, in direct response to MacDiarmid's use of Scots and its many variations. In accepting that he himself must use the English, and not the Welsh, language as a means of creative expression, however, R.S. Thomas hoped that he would somehow be able to use English in an alternative, un-English way. In order to signal his cultural (if not linguistic) 'difference,' and in order to assert his 'Welshness,' Thomas perhaps *did* propose a kind of 'Synthetic English,' in a stylistic sense at least, through urging English writers in Wales to apply the bardic devices of Welsh-language poets. He writes in "Some Contemporary Scottish Writing:"

If only more Welshmen would read some of the older writers like Emrys ap Iwan and Theophilus Evans, we would have less of that limping or stilted Welsh which is a mere translation of an English idiom, and if those of us who write in English would read more widely among such men as Dafydd ap Gwilym, Tudor Aled, and Goronwy Owen, as well as paying more attention to the discipline of the strict

metres, our work might begin to show some difference from that of the essentially urban-minded English poets who write for the most part in a highly sophisticated manner and with a consistently town outlook. (SLPR, 29)

Thomas's belief here is that those writing poetry in English in Wales needed to root their writing in the distinctive traditions of the Welsh past if they were to succeed in being authentically 'Welsh'. This meant considering their place within the Welsh bardic tradition, to consider their literary heritage from a technical viewpoint as much as from a cultural one. They needed to veer away from the values he suggests their language *automatically* represent, or what it undoubtedly represents for him, i.e. bourgeois intellectualism and urbanisation. Through advocating a detailed study of strict metre, and urging writers to become somehow resistant through structural methods if they are unable to do so through use of the Welsh language, Thomas suggests, there is room to develop a kind of "Synthetic English." The term 'synthetic' seems entirely appropriate here, for what Thomas advocates is that the English language is taken out of context, and removed from its natural, 'familiar' surroundings, to an altogether different cultural climate. Writing *cynghanedd*, a strict Welsh bardic metre, in English, for example, is an illustration of how a language appropriates itself around a form, the language becoming 'synthetic,' i.e. artificially used, manipulated even, in order to fit the intrinsically Welsh form.

The 1947 broadcast "The Poet's Voice" is also interesting in this context, for here Thomas expresses, only a year after writing his first "Scottish" piece, that his poetry has

become a conscious effort to reflect his “un-English”<sup>157</sup> identity. This very term “un-English” seems directly borrowed from MacDiarmid (who claimed to be “utterly un-English”) and here Thomas, once again, promotes the idea that “if we are to be known as Welsh poets then our work must be a true expression of the life of our country in all its forms.”<sup>158</sup> Of his own poem, “Wales,” he writes:

I have tried to convey the atmosphere of our land at the present time, while using a great deal of falling assonance to suggest the tragedy of our position, and an occasional rising sound to suggest the faint gleams of hope which still come to us like sunlight on the mountain side.<sup>159</sup>

As Thomas demonstrates here, the way in which he uses the ‘colonial’ language reflects his own cultural ‘difference,’ and he is aware of using the language stylistically in such a way that it is able to continually capture its essential difference from the colonial tongue, and that the language used also conveys a sense of otherness. One can perhaps see how, through rhythmically vibrant lines in “Wales” such as “Listen! Listen! Where the river fastens / The trees together with a blue thread / I hear the ousel of Cilgwri telling / The mournful story of the long dead,” or “The very air is veined with darkness – hearken! / The brown owl wakens in the wood now” (AL, 8), that Thomas is attempting to develop an audibly different ‘sound’ to the poem, to convey perhaps the mysterious dimension of the native, conjuring up the notion of an esoteric, indigenous, and most importantly, *inaccessible* (for the coloniser) underworld.

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<sup>157</sup> Transcript of “The Poet’s Voice,” BBC Broadcast. August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1947

<sup>158</sup> Thomas, “The Poet’s Voice.”

The notion of manipulating the given language order to give it an inherent identity for the colonised minority is extremely reminiscent of Homi K. Bhabha's theories of ambivalence and mimicry. In his essay "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," Bhabha draws close attention to the relationship between the coloniser and colonised, expressing an unease at simplistic views of the power division between the two. As the title itself suggests, mimicry is an integral part of this transferral of power, as a characteristic that implies both the desire, on the part of the colonised, to imitate *and* disrupt the colonial norm. Bhabha's theory discusses colonialist discourse in terms of cultural *threat*, as a twofold experience that threatens not only the colonised subject but also the imperial power. He quotes Lacan in order to illustrate this point:

Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage. . . . It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled – exactly like the technique of camouflage practised in human warfare.

(LC, 85)

Camouflage, as is seen here, has the potential to both disguise and deceive, and it is its capacity for doing both that makes it such a suitable analogy for the study of the post-colonial subject. The power relationship between the coloniser and the colonised is not as simple as a mere division of power; it is singularly more difficult to define. Whereas the colonised subject comes under the influence of the colonial power, that subject also has

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<sup>159</sup> Thomas, "The Poet's Voice."

within itself the capacity to challenge the mode of power, and, in a word, to assert its difference from it. Under English colonial rule, it is often stated that subjects are Anglicized by discourse, and it is perhaps worth reconsidering Bhabha's statement that "to be Anglicized is *emphatically* not to be English" (LC, 87) in the context of Welsh writers in English, for this is exactly what R.S. Thomas envisages as their aim, "to show some difference," and that "every Welsh writer whatever his language, has a responsibility...He should work for the continuance of this tradition" (SLPR, 53). Thomas here emphasises the fact that the English language is not necessarily a marker of *one's colonialism, and that it can also be used subversively, in order to show one's resistance to colonial processes.*

There is a link here to the discourse of the uncanny, for what ultimately happens to the English language in such colonial situations, and in particular with consideration to the aspect of synthesis and artifice, is that the colonised subject succeeds in estranging *the colonial language from itself. English is no longer English – it is a construct – and this again stresses the idea that "to be Anglicized is emphatically not to be English,"* that it is the English language, in this context, that becomes 'unhomed,' in order for the colonised subject to feel 'at home.' The 'standard' English of the coloniser is overturned, making it seem alien and foreign, proving a kind of comforting alienation for the colonised subject. As Bhabha would have it, it is a subtle difference that suddenly becomes clear: "almost the same, *but not quite*" (LC, 86). It overturns, therefore, the kind of estrangement felt by the English language writer, who identifies with Wales and the Welsh language, and yet feels the poignancy

of having to transpose the raw material of his imagination and experience into the alien medium of English speech which has no exact equivalents for *mynydd* and *bwlch*, *cwm* and *hafod*; poetry being, as all will allow, in the last resort untranslatable (SLPR, 62).

Here Thomas manifests the frustration he feels in being unable to express adequately his Welsh identity through the English tongue, feeling that something is ‘lost in translation,’ becoming somehow incoherent, incomplete and ultimately, imperfect. And yet, in this later piece “Words and the Poet,” Thomas also admits being drawn to the Welsh language because of its allure as an alien tongue, an attraction to something unmistakably ‘other’ in himself. He notes how he is not “unaware of the possible fascination of the opposite, the different, the alien” (SLPR, 81), because for Thomas, ultimately, the Welsh language, not being his native language, is also ‘alien’ to him. On the one hand, therefore, Thomas is painfully aware of his alienation from the Welsh language and identity, and yet, occasionally, it is this very acknowledgement of this ‘alien’ – both in himself, and in the Welsh language – that spurs his longing and intrigues him.

Discussing the ambivalence of the bilingual identity, he interestingly also talks in terms of the ‘homeliness’ of language. When a Welsh speaker uses English in order to make his point, for example, Thomas perceives the Welsh speaker as believing “that [is] a much more effective way of *driving it home*” (SLPR, 62. My italics). The ultimate point here is, of course, that Thomas is unable, paradoxically, to feel ‘at home’ linguistically, since Welsh is not, and cannot be, his ‘native’ language, *iaith yr aelwyd*, the language of the hearth. This is precisely the dilemma that leads him to the use of such “Synthetic

English/Welsh” within his poetry. This becomes a deliberate attempt by Thomas to imbue his poetry with a Welsh ‘feel,’ primarily in the use of Welsh place-names and characters, in order to feel *more at home* in his own poetry as well as his own, personal experience. Although there is not anything inherently different in the English used to construct the poems, there is a sense in which Thomas is able to assert the ‘unnaturalness’ of the bilingual existence through the subtle use of certain words and names. Jason Walford Davies’s Gororau’r Iaith, previously mentioned, is an important discussion in this context, a study which unearths many ‘covert’ references to Welsh poetry in Thomas’s work, and indeed, stresses the fact that Thomas’s work is more ‘Welsh-identified’ than is often perhaps realised. Davies’s discussion is also illuminating with regard to pinpointing Thomas’s ‘difference’ from the majority of Welsh writers in English. Davies writes:

The nature of Thomas’s literary reference speaks volumes – quite literally at times – and I wish to coin a new term to describe his work – ‘Eingl-Gymraeg.’<sup>160</sup> The vastness, specification and sophistication of the Welsh echoes in his work testify that he has returned to the very source, and familiarised himself fully with Welsh literature rather than depending on some Anglo Welsh ‘seepage’ that is too often vague and unspecific. (GI, 326. My translation.)

According to Walford Davies’s reading here, Thomas would appear to have followed MacDiarmid’s advice that “Certainly English will not serve us. We must have Gaelic and

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<sup>160</sup> I have left this untranslated for it seemingly speaks for itself.



Old Norse and much else,” (LP, 21) through re-familiarising himself with the older literature in Wales in order to imbue his work with the ‘distinct’ flavour and character. It is significant, therefore, that he resists being defined as ‘Anglo-Welsh.’ The term Walford Davies proposes here to describe his work – “Eingl-*Gymraeg*” – does indeed suggest that Thomas has succeeded in producing a literature “with a feel of its own to it” in the way he had proposed. Although a translation of this term would probably serve to undo its meaning, it certainly suggests something along the lines of a Welsh-speaking writer, within a Welsh social context writing in the English tongue. Certainly it suggests an active, living involvement in one’s culture and language, rather than a passive geographical context.

As Walford Davies uncovers the Welsh references in the poet’s work, he places him within a wider ‘Celtic’ context, seeing how MacDiarmid’s work, along with the work of other writers, primarily from Scotland and Ireland, was instrumental in Thomas’s development as a ‘national’ poet. “By studying both cultures (Scottish and Irish) side by side,” writes Walford Davies, “it is Thomas’s intention to secure an alternative Act of Union” (GI, 132), highlighting the importance, for Thomas, of contesting the imperial structure of ‘Great Britain.’ Also, Walford Davies sees Thomas’s two prose pieces on Scottish writing as testifying to how his “previous disappointment was transformed into a positive, perceptive vision” (GI, 132). The ‘previous disappointment’ mentioned refers to the episode already noted in Chapter 1, when Thomas, in searching for Macleod’s Celtic ideal, finds that on that wet and rather miserable excursion, “He did not get one glimpse of Fiona Macleod’s magical land” (A, 47). There is a sense in which MacDiarmid’s

vision therefore restored his faith in the Celtic comparability of Wales and Scotland, reshaping the romanticised ideal into a political archetype.

Thomas uses Welsh names and place-names, therefore, in order to signal his difference, as well as to relate his experience of unhomeliness and displacement in Wales. “The Welsh Hill Country” for example, portrays the meaninglessness of the ‘homely’ names of the farms in the hill country:

Too far for you to see  
The moss and the mould on the cold chimneys,  
The nettles growing through the cracked doors,  
The houses stand empty at Nant-yr-Eira,  
There are holes in the roofs that are thatched with  
    sunlight,  
And the fields are reverting to the bare moor.

Too far, too far to see,  
The set of his eyes and the slow phthisis  
Wasting his frame under the ripped coat,  
There’s a man still farming at Ty’n y Fawnog,  
Contributing grimly to the accepted pattern,  
The embryo music dead in his throat. (SF, 46)

Evidently the poem is automatically placed in a Welsh context because of the names of the houses and farms, but these very names are rendered devoid of their meaning, and become a kind of ‘haunting’ of their original ‘homely’ context. The uncanny becomes a presence, as Thomas’s repetitive jibe to the spectator “too far for you to see” indicates how that which is familiar and homely has become, when viewed more closely, something unfamiliar and frightening, a destructive, vacuous, *inanimate* entity – one that *should* represent live culture and an ‘authentic’ Welsh home. “Nant-yr-Eira,” literally meaning “Snow-Brook,” evokes intimations of crisp, cool, whiteness and yet is bizarrely at odds with the stifling mustiness of the moss, mould, and nettles. Even the sunlight

seems intrusive and inadequate, and once again highlights the ways in which the home is pervaded by unfamiliar, unsettling attributes.

In the second stanza, the farmer, too, is seen as having been invaded by the decay of culture, “Wasting his frame” as he tries, in vain, to preserve what is left of his ‘own’ home and identity. Though he may be “still farming at Ty’n y Fawnog,” the name itself no longer constitutes a living home, the farmer is rather part of the “accepted pattern / The embryo music dead in his throat” (SF, 46). The very fact that he conforms to a “pattern” rather than an organic, instinctive way of life, also suggests that the farmer has somehow become an automaton – that he himself becomes representative of the meaninglessness of this way of life. It is also worth noting the connection of the house’s name with Thomas’s Celtic ‘ideal’ for *mawnog* is peat, and a brutal distortion of Thomas’s ideal of the “peat and the heather” as constituting cultural purity.

For the Welsh-speaking reader, however, this poem offers so much more. There is an added poignancy in Thomas’s jibe “too far for you to see,” in the context of the English-language reader, as, for one unfamiliar with Welsh-language literature, it is possible to miss the deeper signification of the names “Nant yr Eira” and “Ty’n y Fawnog.” “Nant-yr-Eira” is a reference to a poem by Iorwerth C. Peate, a Welsh poem that laments, in the very same terms expressed here, the departure of the people from the land and into the towns, the loss of a way of life, and specifically in a Welsh-language context. “Tŷ’n y Fawnog,” also, brings to mind the poem “Salem,” by T. Rowland Hughes. The words “Tŷ’n y Fawnog” are synonymous, in Welsh-language circles, with the famous portrait by Curnow Vosper, an ambiguous (and very famous) portrait, its subject being Sian Owen Ty’n y Fawnog, who appears to be rising from a pew and

leaving chapel. As she does so, her shawl creases, and it is possible to see the outline of a demonic face in her shawl, that many have attributed to the the devil himself. This haunting vision seems to tie in with Thomas's own twofold experience of such Welsh culture, for in "looking closer" there is no hearth here at all, only "the embryo music dead in his throat" that becomes an eerie reminder of the darker propensities of the decay of such culture.

This is essentially a poem that deals with Thomas's disillusionment, the realisation that the way of life around which he had begun to construct his identity, the life of the *hendre*, no longer existed. "Too far for you to see," is also self-addressed, for Thomas himself has been culturally constructing himself from the periphery, and primarily from the viewpoint of the ideal. The 'reality' seen here, therefore challenges not only a preconception, but also Thomas's 'own' identity, and to what extent the identity he has constructed for himself can be allowed to exist, to become 'homely,' when the very way of life he seeks is decaying. The jarring of 'Nant-yr Eira' and 'Ty'n-y-Fawnog' with their original meaning and literary context is also a jarring of Thomas with himself; a reference perhaps only fully understood by Welsh-language readers of the poetry.

This intra-familial referencing is a means through which Thomas lets the Welsh reader 'in' on something that he will not always reveal to the English-language reader, another method of the 'resistant' writing he had seen exemplified by MacDiarmid. In conversation with Jason Walford Davies in 1999, Thomas admits that:

I am a Welshman, speak Welsh, and am familiar with my  
country's history, literature and folklore. I have written

poems out of this situation which are not difficult, but which are only partly intelligible to a non-Welshman without footnotes. (GI, 318)

It is thus Thomas's intention that readers of his poems should be in possession of the, as MacDiarmid would have it, "out of the way" knowledge of the native culture. Reading Thomas's poems is thus a different experience for Welsh and English readers and, according to Walford Davies, "for full understanding, demands a knowledge of Welsh history and folklore" (GI, 320).

"Cynddylan on a Tractor" is perhaps a prime example of this. Cynddylan, as it has been revealed in an interview by the poet's son, Gwydion Thomas, was also a real character from R.S. Thomas's Manafon days, whom Gwydion describes as "the Jones boy from Llwyn Coppa who would let me drive the tractor."<sup>161</sup> For a reader familiar with Welsh literature, however, the name "Cynddylan" also evokes the heroic figure Brenin Cynddylan, who is commemorated in the ninth century poem cycle, "Canu Heledd." The poem is ultimately an exploration of those poignant, painful differences Thomas views as existing between the historical, legendary figure, and his present day 'common' counterpart.

In "Canu Heledd," Cynddylan's sister, Heledd, laments the death of her brothers in the war with England. The loss of Cynddylan is felt more acutely in the poem as it is his kingdom, "Stafell Gynddylan," which becomes the recurrent address for each stanza. For one familiar with this context, it is easy to detect the mock-heroic tone of the opening lines, and the allusion to the difference between Cynddylan, past and present:

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Ah, you should see Cynddylan on a tractor.  
 Gone the old look that yoked him to the soil;  
 He's a new man now, part of the machine,  
 His nerves of metal and his blood oil. (SF, 54)

As in "The Welsh Hill Country," Cynddylan appears to have become some kind of a machine, an automaton, a dramatic contrast to the original Cynddylan of "Canu Heledd" who is mourned as an emblem of a living culture. This Cynddylan, in contrast, is a man of material concerns, a symbol of how the industrial revolution has succeeded in overturning the 'traditional' life of the countryside, effectively turning people into machines. It is again a symbol of how the traditional life of *yr hendre* has ceased to be a living reality. He ends with the image of Cynddylan on his tractor, drowning out the 'natural' sounds of the surrounding countryside through the use of his own, destructive mechanical sounds:

And all the birds are singing, bills wide in vain  
 As Cynddylan passes proudly up the lane. (SF, 54)

Here is the tragicomic image (intensified, once more by the fact that what he is drowning out specifically here are *birds*, a symbol of cultural freedom and continuity), the farmer assuming a regal air as he becomes the leader of his own particular kingdom. Yet again, those unaware of its literary context are perhaps unaware that what is also being lost is a national way of life, and of a set of cultural values. The more distanced and foreign the character of Cynddylan becomes in Thomas's poem, the more he symbolises the foreignness of one's own culture, and one's own home and language. Cynddylan's unawareness of the 'birds . . . bills wide in vain' in fact mirrors the way in which material culture is eroding a whole way of life and displacing people from their native, natural

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<sup>161</sup> Walford Davies, "Quietly as Snow: Gwydion Thomas in conversation," *New Welsh Review* 64 (Summer 2004): 26.

surroundings. It is perhaps significant that this is also an auditory metaphor, the sound of the birds becoming commingled with the aggressive hum of the machine, becoming a hybrid sound, menacing in the fact that underneath the clamour of machinery there is a more natural 'essence' attempting to push through. Furthermore, the poem in itself becomes a reflection of the way in which contemporary Welsh poetry in English, without an awareness of Welsh tradition, cannot begin to conceive of Cynddylan in the same way as the older, more 'traditional' and 'authentic' verse.

It was mainly through literary allusion, therefore, that Thomas chose to assert his 'difference' and to maintain the power of the intrafamilial address, thematically rather than linguistically. But in seeking to describe adequately the experience of the colonised and Anglicized writer in Wales, and like MacDiarmid, to be "utterly un-English" in approach, Thomas was to some extent restricted. He found that, as someone for whom Welsh was inescapably a second language, he could not write poetry in Welsh – and could not, linguistically at least, follow MacDiarmid's cultural manifesto. He continued, therefore, to use English as a means of expression in the poetry, and despite occasional translations of his own work, and the publication of one original Welsh poem in "Y Fflam" in 1950,<sup>162</sup> his poetic efforts remained from this point onwards in the English language.

It is rather through Welsh-language prose that Thomas subsequently expresses his cultural ideology, speaking out on what he felt to be some of the main inconsistencies of the Welsh people. Again, he follows MacDiarmid's example, for "like a true prophet MacDiarmid does not direct his wrath solely or even mainly against other nations...it is

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<sup>162</sup> For a more detailed study of Thomas's Welsh poetry see Gororau'r Iaith, 312-316.

the quislings and lickspittles in his own country that are his chief enemies” (SLPR, 31). Thomas becomes aware of the poet’s ‘duty’ to speak out directly to the people of the nation, rather than to address the colonisers. In his prose piece “Arian a Swydd” (1946), for example, he looks to the situation in another Celtic country to seek parallels for Wales, and is scathingly critical of what he sees as Ireland’s ‘materialism’ since gaining independence. Ireland, he writes, has succeeded in doing many things that countries such as Scotland and Wales can only dream of, having achieved self-government and the right to rule over their own affairs. But ultimately, this has also been responsible for their downfall. “They have therefore failed to avoid one of the greatest pitfalls of the world, which is materialism” (SLPR, 31), writes Thomas. However, Thomas subsequently transfers his concern about Ireland’s materialist state of affairs into a reflection on Wales’s own indifference. Ireland, ultimately, is unimportant here, but what should worry Wales, Thomas asserts, is that the values of his idealised *gwerin* have been replaced by another set of values. “It is within our borders that our enemies lie” he states, and “as long as there is food and drink, dog racing and cinemas, most people do not care what government is in power” (PMI, 32. My own translation). This culminates in Thomas’s dramatic and rather ‘MacDiarmidian’ statement that self-government for Wales is futile, for the country has already shown that it does not have the ideals necessary for self-government, and cannot govern itself. And above all, it would be difficult to govern a people who are, in Thomas’s words, both “selfish and spiritually immature” (PMI, 33. My own translation). MacDiarmid’s voice booms in the background, as one is reminded of his tendency, in Lucky Poet, to disparage many of Scottish natives as “nit-wits,” “scatter-brains” who appeared to him “infuriatingly silly” (LP, 300). He, like Thomas,



claims that the people have yielded to a superficial lifestyle, and that “Anywhere you go in Scotland to-day / You can hear the people / Struggling to think and feel as little as possible” (LP, 320).

In “Yr Eglwys a Chymru” published in *Y Llan* in 1949, initially as a response to the Anglicised attitudes of the Church in Wales, R.S. Thomas again shows his discontent with the present situation in Wales, in terms of the character of the Welsh ‘people’/collective. He refers specifically to the contemporary debate concerning an incident during The National Eisteddfod in 1949, when the local parish church flew the Union Jack from the church tower at Dolgellau. Even though the flag was subsequently removed by nationalists, Thomas turns the episode into a study of how the Welsh have been responsible for this internal conflict. No doubt, he says, English-speakers have been both “rude and unchristian” (PMI, 44. My translation.) in their attitude, but, Thomas states, “. . . if we do not respect ourselves, if we do not have the backbone to withstand the English infiltration, we cannot expect anything but complete inconsiderateness” (PMI, 44. My translation).

It is not only the Welsh people, however, who come under attack in his prose, but also, and far more brutally, himself. Many of his prose pieces, especially those originally delivered as speeches or lectures, mark the fact that Thomas, by his own admission, was indeed, the ‘Sancho Panza’ and not the ‘Don Quixote’ of his literary relationship with MacDiarmid. In being unable, as MacDiarmid was, to flaunt his knowledge and his ability in quite the same way, Thomas rather felt the need to highlight his own intellectual inadequacies. For Thomas, intellectualism was closely associated with anxiety and insecurity, often undermining the ‘public’ persona he felt necessary to adopt at times. He

did not follow MacDiarmid's example in terms of intellectual arrogance, but rather the opposite – his acute awareness of the need for intellectual flexibility within the 'public' persona resulted in painfully obvious intellectual insecurity. In "Words and the Poet" (1964) for instance, what emerges immediately is the fact that Thomas was 'not-at-home' in the medium of the public address, being far too aware of his own individuality and fallibility. He also seems preoccupied by the audience's expectations and preconceptions of 'the poet' and the public figure. The first paragraph of this text is a case in point:

There are personal reasons for my phrasing of the title of this lecture thus. 'Language and Poetry' would be more abstract and would place too great a strain on my puny learning. Even 'Language and the Poet' would be beyond me, because the comparatively new subjects of linguistics and semantics are growing daily, and there is already a formidable bibliography of which I am almost entirely ignorant. I must fall back, therefore, on the components of language; not because of any specialised knowledge of them, but because they are material which a poet uses. In so far as I have any claim to have written poems at all, it was with words that I made them; and I realise that, at the risk of wearying you, it must be about my concern with words that I must speak (SLPR, 51).

Immediately one is struck by the disparaging terminology used to describe his own address, he is "puny" and "ignorant" and he must address these failings immediately, to

emphasise his own limitations in dealing with the subject matter. He is acutely aware of the fact that this is not, after all, a poem that people may choose to read or not to read, but a direct, public address, in which he is the sole focus of people's attention, and a speaker to whom people have chosen to listen. Such a stark realisation of one's individuality and one's individual responsibility suddenly seems unsettling, and *defamiliarising*. This becomes a defining characteristic of Thomas's prose works, for even in later prose works, such as "Unity" (1988), he still feels the need to highlight his limited, ineffectual knowledge. In this particular lecture, he starts off by saying:

I have chosen such a wide-ranging subject in order to give myself plenty of room to escape from my own ignorance. A scholarly man would focus upon one aspect of this matter and would explore it thoroughly: but, for my own part, the aim of this lecture is to hide the narrowness of my knowledge and scholarship. (LP, 143)

Even here, Thomas feels the need to distinguish between himself and "the scholar" anxiously worrying away at the limitations of his own knowledge, again considering himself "ignorant" in the company of others. In his lecture "Abercuawg" (1976) also, he shows his complete lack of self-assurance in stating that, "since I am a specialist in neither subject [linguistics and philosophy] you can imagine in advance what kind of mess I shall make of it" (SLPR, 122). Thomas is almost compulsive in his need to address his own failings in front of an audience, revealing a great deal about how uncomfortable he felt in addressing the 'collective,' despite his urgent desire to do so.

Considering that Freud terms the uncanny as concerning “everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (U, 345), this seems to be an apt description of R.S. Thomas’s position as he moves from poetry to prose: “Saving his face / in verse from the humiliations prose / inflicted on him” (CP, 516) as he puts it in his poem “A Life.” Certainly as Thomas becomes aware of his attentive audience, he seems conscious of the ‘alien’ territory he has entered. This is not, after all, the familiar medium of poetry within which he may remain hidden, within which he may *insinuate*, but a medium in which he, himself, has ‘suddenly come to light’ as having a clear, unambiguous viewpoint. There are echoes here also of Sigmund Freud’s own position in entering the ‘unfamiliar’ field of the uncanny. A number of critics have argued that, as Freud attempts to secure his knowledge of the uncanny, he ends up becoming lost in it, being ‘undone’ by his own subject. His opening paragraph is self-justifying in a similar way to Thomas’s. He makes the point that “It is only rarely that a psycho-analyst feels impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics,” marking his own unfamiliarity with the subject, and also confesses that he “works in the other strata of mental life” (U, 219). Freud here seems compelled to address, as Thomas does, his own inadequacies, in fear of being usurped by the very subject he wishes to explore intellectually.

Nicholas Royle suggests that Freud becomes ‘lost’ in the field of the uncanny. Freud’s essay is, in Royle’s words “one of his most thought-provoking and – in the strongest sense of the word – haunting works. It keeps trying to lay certain ghosts to rest, but they keep coming back” (Uncanny, 51). What Royle here intends by ‘coming back’ is that the very subject Freud chooses to explore confuses him, and muddles his address – that the text itself disrupts the ‘truths’ Freud is attempting to elucidate, almost by

accident. While Freud claims: "It is long since he has experienced or heard of anything which has given him an uncanny impression" (U, 220), he nevertheless relates his own personal uncanny experiences during the course of the text.

While this sense of intellectual insecurity and confusion highlights what is perhaps the greatest contrast between R.S. Thomas and Hugh MacDiarmid, it nevertheless demonstrates a preoccupation with identity that both poets undoubtedly share. There is perhaps nowhere more fitting to start any discussion on identity, and in particular that identity as belonging to a particular community or culture, than with their very names. Both "Hugh MacDiarmid" and "R.S. Thomas" are, to a large extent, constructed personas, and throughout Lucky Poet and Thomas's prose, both demonstrate a preoccupation with the image projected by those names. One's name is *proprius*, that is, it is 'one's own' property, and yet one's name can often appear distant and displaced. One may also experience moments of uncertainty and unease when one hears one's name uttered and another person answers, feeling responsible for the name, despite the fact that it belongs to someone else, and that whatever the 'other' person does has no bearing on one's 'own' life. As Royle illustrates, the uncanny can entail "a disturbance of the very idea of personal or private property including the properness of proper names, one's so called 'own' name" (Uncanny, 1). And a change of one's name is perhaps simultaneously a means of expressing, or affirming, one's ownership of the name, while expressing unease with one's sense of identity. Nicholas Royle is quick to remind the reader, "Whether one loves or hates one's name, one is already in a double bind; for the name is always in some sense the name of a stranger. One's name is something crucial and superfluous, at once a part of, yet also apart from, oneself" (Uncanny, 191). One's name

therefore, is always destined to be a kind of 'stranger' to a person, being that which decides who the person is, a word to which a person 'belongs.' At the same time, a name is not exclusively the 'property' of any one person. A name in this sense, having been considered as removed from any 'essence,' can be manipulated in order to convey meaning, can become a tactical title.

It is interesting in this context to consider the importance placed on names by both MacDiarmid and Thomas. Both seem to have 'played the game' of ascribing national identity to a name, and this is exemplified in the literary 'persona' created by both poets. In MacDiarmid, there is a clean break between his personal and private persona, being always, in the public eye, "Hugh MacDiarmid," while he remained "Christopher Murray Grieve" to his friends and family. It also implies two separate identities. In meeting MacDiarmid, the critic Meic Stephens noted that "Christopher Grieve I found to be a softly-spoken, genial man who, in private conversation, showed none of the prickliness for which Hugh MacDiarmid was famous."<sup>163</sup> Many people claimed to have had similar experiences of R.S. Thomas, the ogre-like public image, encouraged both by the press and at times by Thomas himself, dissipating in their acquaintance with the poet. This is not to say that R.S. Thomas, of course, encouraged the division in the same 'clinical' way as MacDiarmid, but it can be suggested that the slight alteration made to his name (having been christened 'Ronald Thomas,' he apparently borrowed the 'Stuart' in his name later from a family source<sup>164</sup>) was connected to an insecure identity. It definitely

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<sup>163</sup> Meic Stephens, "Sad case of a 'perfect' Welsh skull in a Scottish Cupboard," *New Welsh Review* 6/3 (1993/1994): 41.

<sup>164</sup> Ioan Roberts ed., *Beti a'i Phobol 1* (Llanrwst: Gwasg Carreg Gwalch) 83. In an interview with Beti George in 1996 he stated that: "One of my mother's cousins was called Stuart, and so I also adopted this name, as she regretted not having called me Stuart in the first place." My translation.

manifested a need to have a 'persona' which communicated his poetic identity, and perhaps one which masked also the personal, possibly much more vulnerable, side to his identity.

MacDiarmid was christened "Christopher Murray Grieve," changing his name to "MacDiarmid" in 1922, in order to find a persona more fitting to the Scots vernacular, and one slightly more distinctive (i.e. less common) than "Christopher." "Hugh MacDiarmid" first became known to the Scottish public when Grieve introduced him in a literary journal, bizarrely enough, as his "friend." John Baglow recalls the incident:

In September 1922 two lyrics written in a rich pastiche of Scots vocabulary appeared in the *Dumferline Press*, introduced by MacDiarmid (as C.M Grieve) as being by a "friend" of his . . . From then on the persona of "M'Diarmid" revealed creative powers which in Grieve had never even been suggested. Lyrics, tough prose in a style indistinguishable from Grieve's, and some short plays and prose in the new medium came pouring out in an enormous spate of energy.<sup>165</sup>

The above extract suggests that the work produced by the persona of "MacDiarmid" was in fact far better than anything that had been produced previously by Grieve, and that the creation of a persona seemed to have imbued Grieve with extraordinary "creative powers." It also seems significant that Grieve, at this point, had not revealed his true identity to his readers, but rather wished to masquerade as MacDiarmid. This certainly

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<sup>165</sup> Baglow 42.

suggests that “MacDiarmid” was more than a mere persona, more of an alter-ego in fact, one that embodied everything Grieve felt to be lacking in himself, including the ability to be the ‘voice’ of Scotland, and also a great poet. As Baglow himself puts it: “If C.M. Grieve is unsure of his vocation, Hugh MacDiarmid by definition is a poet.”<sup>166</sup>

Thomas also seems to have had a complex relationship with his own name, manifesting a desire to develop a persona that enabled him to reject some of the bourgeois English values he felt his name represented. In Wales: a problem of translation he writes:

Ronald Thomas. The first name suggests that my parents were Anglo-Welsh people, living in the industrial belt of South Wales. Had they been pure Welsh, there is the hope, not entirely justified, because of the thousands of Robert and William Thomas’ so christened by their Welsh-speaking parents, that they might have called me Rhodri or Rheinallt (WPT, 5).

Thomas is all too aware of the significance and symbolism of his name, and of the values ascribed to it that are in fact alien to the identity he wished to have. Lurking in the background also may be some of the negative feelings Thomas has towards his mother (more so than his relatively ‘absent’ father) and the fact that it was her decision to call him “Ronald” rather than something like “Rhodri” or “Rheinallt”. He feels further estranged when he considers the structure of his surname, which “has an aitch in it to conform to English usage, which so often means inserting letters in words and then not

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pronouncing them!” (WPT, 5). The key term here is of course “English usage,” for Thomas felt that his name, that which was supposedly ‘his own’ and a marker of self, was in some way compliant with the English tongue and the colonial order, undermining his entire cultural identity. Thomas expressed his dissatisfaction at the ways in which English colonisation had directly affected the ‘freedom’ of Welsh names. He recalls the example of Euros Bowen, who had been unable to register his son’s name as “Gwyn ab Euros” despite the fact that he was “living in the very Welsh area of Penllyn in Meirionydd.” (WPT, 5) It was so often the case, Thomas argued, that the “English” version of a name succeeded in ‘writing out’ the original Welsh, a further example of the violence of colonisation. The constitutional ‘labels’ attached to one’s name haunt Thomas, as he writes:

When one’s birth is registered one becomes a member of the United Kingdom, a child of the State and an inheritor of the British Empire, such as remains of it. And the official language of such a member is English. I mention this in order to emphasise the almost silent pressure upon a minority now not only living alongside a majority one, but open on all sides to it. (WPT, 6)

Not only does Thomas’s name affect him, therefore, but it also carries with it the unnerving realisation of submission, and the underlying feeling of guilt in the fact that he carries in his name the very process of colonisation, automatically *furthering* that process. “Had I seen the light in time,” remarks Thomas, “I would have dropped the aitch, thus

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<sup>166</sup> Baglow 197.

reverting to Tomas, a name at least as old as the Greek New Testament. Those who know Wales will know that I am known locally as Tomos, which even if a *pis aller* is better than nothing” (WPT, 6). Within his own community, Thomas therefore attempts to undo the damage done by colonisation, by ensuring that his name is used differently by others. Also, he wishes to connect his identity with a pre-colonial era, thus ridding it of its colonial characteristics.

Thomas also addresses this matter in his essay Cymru or Wales? in which he questions “why in heaven’s name, when there are so many beautiful girls’ names in Welsh should we have saddled them with Mary and Jane and so on?” (CorW? 17). And yet, as with the tactic of his local title of ‘Tomos,’ he suggests a way in which to re-familiarise the names that have been distorted by colonialism, through “adding his farm or house, so that we get Ifan Ty Mawr or Sian Ty’n Llan” (CorW? 17). Again, it is the sense of a rooted, culturally-enriching ‘home’ that counters the alienation, this becoming, according to Thomas: “an example of how the simplicity of everyday life can overcome apparently sophisticated problems” (CorW? 17). The stress once again falls on the ‘dear, familiar things’ in order to re-establish cultural order, the necessity to strive for a kind of cultural essence or ‘truth.’

Thomas was also keen to explore the ‘Welshness’ of his own family history, and he felt some discomfort in discovering, as one side of the family was Welsh-speaking, that his name also signalled a departure from the language. In an interview with Ned Thomas and John Barnie, he talks of the ‘Miles connection,’ Miles being the name of his father’s mother, who was Welsh-speaking, and also of high standing, a rather wealthy family. He writes that:

there was an air of the Thomas's as having come down in the world for what that is worth. It was as I learned the Welsh language that I became increasingly more interested in the Miles connection and less so in the Anglicized Thomases. (MS, 22)

His reference to 'coming down in the world' here is perhaps also to do with his departure from Welsh life, and being all the 'poorer' for not establishing these Welsh-speaking connections. Again, his mother, with her bourgeois, English values, is to blame: "I realized that my mother had never made much of the Miles connection, mainly, I fancy, because they were Welsh-speaking!" (MS, 22). 'Thomas' thus was a name R.S. slightly resented, for it continued to serve as a reminder of his own inappropriateness of being – his estrangement from himself.

The development of his use of his initials can also be linked both with Thomas's poetic ambitions, and as a disguise for his colonial identity. There is something in the initials "R.S." that echoes the names of poets such as T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats, not to mention Welsh poets such as W.J. Gruffudd, T. Gwynn Jones. R. Williams Parry and T.H. Parry Williams. Also, the addition of 'Stuart' allows his identity to be that little more distinctive, and he remarks in an interview with Beti George in 1996 that, "in seeing how many R.Thomases there were, I added an 'S.'"<sup>167</sup> In order to distinguish himself, therefore, from the indistinct "public" he needed to amend his name, make it correspond to his particular feeling of separateness from the mass.

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<sup>167</sup> Beti a'i Phobol 1 83.

As he became further removed from his own name on a personal, psychological level, he began, therefore, to use the abbreviated form of 'Ronald Stuart' in order to develop a literary persona, and also, more importantly, to mask the non-Welsh first names. Thomas, while an undergraduate, had experimented with various identities, and had been mischievous in changing his pseudonym of 'Curtis Langdon' to 'Figaro' after hearing his work criticised by the college magazine's editor, to see if it would be published under a different name! He describes his first pseudonym, 'Curtis Langdon,' as "laughably literary" (A, 38), being able also to see it in retrospect as another symptom of his bourgeois upbringing. Again, it is linked directly to his mother: "My mother often used to ask the Boots librarian if she had anything nice for her to read. So coming from an atmosphere of Ethel M. Dell and Warwick Deeping it was not unlikely that I chose the pen name I did" (MS, 23). 'R.S. Thomas' was also therefore a means of reversing the bourgeois overtone of 'Curtis Langdon,' a name that marked, above all, his mother's influence.

Both Thomas and MacDiarmid were escaping, therefore, from names they felt misrepresented them in some way, names that challenged the 'proprius' and their sense of ownership of their identity. Two texts in which Thomas and MacDiarmid seem to respond directly to this feeling of displacement, and also to the idea of a poet 'unhomed' within his culture are Annals of the Five Senses (1923) by MacDiarmid and Thomas's short prose work "The Mountains" (1968). In both texts, the poets consciously focus on that which is everyday and familiar in their lives, revealing an extraordinary and unfamiliar quality to what they see. It is not only the fact that they "see things differently" that is interesting, but the fact that the distorted view reveals an exploration

of their own psychological complications, the question of self and identity (both personal and cultural) that is never far from the surface. Above all, both poets can be seen struggling to define themselves in hazy, nebulous surroundings, and are constantly threatened by the notion of the dissipating self. As MacDiarmid writes in Lucky Poet, “to improve his own character is a man’s surest means of improving the world” (LP, 4), confirming his belief in the inherent link between one’s sense of self, and the ease with which one deals with, comprehends, and engages with, the surrounding world.

The Annals of the Five Senses, published by MacDiarmid in 1923 and one of his first works, is considered one of MacDiarmid’s most experimental and curiously mysterious pieces. Initially published in Grieve’s name, parts of it were written in hospital in France, and it expresses, in the poet’s own words, “the main ideas of all my subsequent work” (LP, xi). In the editors’ preface, Watson and Riach relate how MacDiarmid believed that he had cured himself, through writing, of his ‘cerebral neuritis,’ and that his work was “a sheaf of studies similar in angle of approach to ‘Cerebral’ but dealing with diverse psychological crises and reactions.”<sup>168</sup> Presumably, therefore, such work is a reflection of an extremely troubled mental and emotional state, the expression of which allows MacDiarmid to explore the tensions and complexities in his life. MacDiarmid is concerned primarily with his own psychological processes, oftentimes placing himself at the centre of the action, ‘watching’ himself from different angles, in an almost voyeuristic, prurient fashion. He also occasionally employs the strategy that R.S. Thomas uses with Neb (and Freud in “The Uncanny”) and writes about

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<sup>168</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid, Annals of the Five Senses and Other Stories Sketches and Plays, ed. Roderick Watson and Alan Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999) xi. Originally published 1923. Further references will be given parenthetically in the text (AFS).

himself in the third person. One gets the impression here that an exploration of ‘diverse psychological crises and reactions’ was in fact an analysis of the nature of his own self/identity. Above all, it manifests MacDiarmid’s strange familiarity with the uncanny, the knowledge of “this haunting sense of stealthiness” (AFS, 22) that constitutes a sense of unease, a sense of being ‘not at home’ in one’s identity. MacDiarmid confirms that his mind “must. . . . see the unfamiliar and unsuspected aspects of all the everyday familiar things that in the sinful arrogance of his individuality he had taken as fixed and fundamental, given and unchanging.”<sup>169</sup>

The third extract from this collection of poetry and prose, and the one demonstrating the most uncanny propensities, “Café Scene,” uses as its preface Wordsworth’s line “I wandered lonely as a cloud.” What MacDiarmid experiences here is not a negative loneliness, but a startling sense of his own individuality and identity, a recognition of himself as being-in-the-world-with-others. The very first passage is worth noting, for it manifests a fascination with mirrors, and the human condition of recognising one’s self, that is reminiscent of R.S. Thomas:

He caught sight of himself in a long narrow mirror –  
practically a full-length reflection, so vivid that it seemed to  
thrust upon him almost with vehemence a sense of  
responsibility for his own identity. (AFS, 20)

Here exactly is the sentiment of the strange and unfamiliar in the familiar. One’s reflection, like one’s name, is that supposedly familiar realm of the *proprius* – one’s own - and yet here the reaction to such an ordinary concept suggests fear – “it seemed to thrust

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<sup>169</sup> AFS 24.

upon him almost with vehemence” - a feeling of estrangement towards one’s sense of Being. There is nothing, therefore, more oddly familiar, than looking at a reflection and realising that what one is looking at is ‘one’s self.’<sup>170</sup> Freud himself, in a footnote in “The Uncanny,” relates the strange experience he had had in glimpsing himself in a mirror:

I was sitting alone in a *wagon-lit* compartment when a more than usually violent jolt of the train swung back the door of the adjoining washing-cabinet, and an elderly gentleman in a dressing-gown and a travelling cap came in. I assumed that in leaving the washing-cabinet, which lay between the two compartments, he had taken the wrong direction and come into my compartment by mistake. Jumping up with the intention of putting him right, I at once realized to my dismay that the intruder was nothing but my own reflection in the looking-glass on the open door. I can still recollect that I thoroughly disliked his appearance. (U, 248)

Freud, therefore, like MacDiarmid, is slightly disturbed by the fact that what he sees is himself, and a person for whom he *must* adopt responsibility, rather than merely observe, and judge, as he initially does within his uncanny instance. As MacDiarmid, also, becomes acutely aware of his own individual self, he finds the world around him increasingly difficult to comprehend. Even this seemingly ordinary action of walking into

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<sup>170</sup> Nicholas Royle quotes in this context a passage from Heinrich Heine: “There is nothing more uncanny than seeing one’s face accidentally in the mirror by moonlight.” (Uncanny, 187)

a café is entirely transformed by this “mirror” moment, and distorts the ordinariness of the day for MacDiarmid. He goes on to relate how he felt

all the afternoon, indeed, a peculiar and unsupportable condition when the most casual sound seem charged with secret and sinister reflections, most ordinary objects endowed with unthinkable and malign properties, the processes of his brain obscurely altered. (AFS, 21)

MacDiarmid, therefore, no longer entrusts his own brain with being able to size things up; the distorted ways in which things appear to him ultimately make him question his own capacity to interpret and understand the world that surrounds him. His world becomes uncanny or, to use a term popularised by MacDiarmid that seems to have a similar meaning, his world becomes “eemis.” This is a term whose exact meaning is difficult to pin down, but is generally recognised to fluctuate between meaning “variable, uncertain” and “dark, gloomy, misty.”<sup>171</sup> It can also indicate, in the context in which it is used by MacDiarmid in his poem “The Eemis Stane,” something that is fathomless, without limitation, and also something “unsteady.” In his poem “The Eemis Stane” MacDiarmid reflects:

I' the how-dumb-deid o' the cauld hairst nicht  
The warl' like an eemis stane  
Wags i' the lift;  
An' my eerie memories fa'  
Like a yowendrift.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> William Grant and David D. Murison eds., *The Compact Scottish National Dictionary*, Vol. 1 A-M. (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1986) 443.

<sup>172</sup> Hugh MacDiarmid. *Selected Poems*, ed. David Craig and John Manson (London: Penguin Books, 1970) 21.



Here, MacDiarmid in the ‘how-dumb-deid,’ the ‘dead-silent-depth’ of the night, sees the world becoming unfamiliar, and estranged from him. He sees himself as separate from the world – displaced from the phenomenon of being-in-the-world, the world appearing before and above him, threatening him, as though it were an unsteady stone about to fall from the sky. It is also, Baglow suggests, “his past life rising like a ghost before him...a confusion of memories likewise offering no vital insights and no pattern, a past as elusive as the truth he seeks.”<sup>173</sup> The ‘stane’ thus becomes a challenge to him, and becomes, as Baglow goes on to argue, representative of a greater sense of “eemisness” that threatens to engulf him:

His existence as a poet is “eemis.” His Scots lyrics are an active definition of the poet’s role, but he soon turns to the reification of his activity as a poet, questioning his material and his form until even poetry becomes an ideal to be realized rather than a means of attaining that ideal.<sup>174</sup>

While his use of “eemis” feelings seems yet again to strengthen the connection between MacDiarmid and the uncanny, it must moreover be taken into consideration that the title of his autobiography also emits the same double-edged uncertainty. As MacDiarmid reminds his readers: “the ‘Lucky’ in my title, of course, embraces both good luck and bad” (LP, 218). The strange connection of such a word with the uncanny is further heightened by the fact that Nicholas Royle, in exploring the many meanings of ‘canny’ (which coincidentally is also a Scottish colloquialism), comes across this very example:

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<sup>173</sup> Baglow 52.

“Already we confront the oddity of a word with a fateful charge (‘lucky’ or ‘fortunate’) a word with conflicting or even antithetical meanings” (Uncanny, 10). MacDiarmid, therefore, seems to have an awareness of a world which is “eemis” and in which he must attempt to define his own position all the more clearly. John Baglow refers to this as a crisis of the personal within MacDiarmid himself, an attempt at understanding his place in the world. Baglow notes that “lost in chaos he must discover order – and realize himself – by writing.”<sup>175</sup> If one is to accept this reading of MacDiarmid’s poetic identity, it is also possible that Scottish identity becomes, much in the same way that Welsh identity became for Thomas, a means of eradicating the “eemis” aspect of the modern world. Scottish life, and MacDiarmid’s Scottish identity, must, therefore, reach global significance if MacDiarmid is to preserve his own identity. As William Power writes of Hugh MacDiarmid, “He has an almost uncanny divination of the total human significance of apparently minor or prosaic happenings in Scotland. At every point he sees the universal in the particular” (LP, 67). It is again fascinating that the word ‘uncanny’ surfaces here, and directly in relation to a re-familiarisation of those vast, universal concepts. Such an interpretation opens up a proliferation of meanings, again suggesting that what happens to MacDiarmid is somehow not just his ‘own’ experience, but simultaneously the experience of the nation and the experience of the world. This, like the ‘uncanny’ itself, is double-edged, for while it suggests a sturdy, reinforced consciousness, it also calls into question the ‘security’ of identity, again, the dissolution of self within the mass.

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<sup>174</sup> Baglow 194.

<sup>175</sup> Baglow 58.

“The Mountains” (1968) by R.S. Thomas invites a similar reading, for here again is a work that explores the intimate processes of the self and the individual, through its exploration of the wider context of a vast, natural world. Like so many of the other prose pieces written by R.S. Thomas, it was written in response to a specific invitation, and to accompany ten wood engravings by Reynolds Stone after drawings in Snowdonia by John Piper. In the words of W. Moelwyn Merchant:

The drawings have the atmospheric precision of an artist who had long made himself at home in the Snowdon range; the wood engravings have the cool accuracy of fine sculpture – like the carved lettering of which Reynolds Stone is a master. And R.S. Thomas’s words have a corresponding precision, a sense of actual place.<sup>176</sup>

Thomas’s piece, indeed, does capture the sense of ‘actual place’ as Merchant has it, and it is, to some extent, like “Café Scene,” a landscape that seems familiar and ‘real’ to the poet. Yet placed in the context of himself as an individual *within* that landscape, of himself as a poet in-the-world, Thomas is also drawn, not so much by will as by instinct, to explore the unfamiliarity of that place. In the same way that there is darkness and threat inherent in MacDiarmid’s routine “Café Scene,” there is also terror and fear hidden in the aesthetic beauty of “The Mountains,” as the seemingly close, familiar vision becomes threateningly ‘other’/alien. Stylistically, indeed, the essay shows Thomas’s departure from his usual fastidious prose style:

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<sup>176</sup> W. Moelwyn Merchant, R.S. Thomas: Writers of Wales (Welsh Arts Council: University of Wales Press, 1979) 77.

Some days you can't see them. The eye bumps into black cloud, low down. Nearer there is the sound of water, tumbling down from wet heights. There is no light, no colour, only grey and green, and the wind blowing. A place to think of firelight in, and blankets and hot tea. And the small column picks its way earthward with its broken burden. He fell on the slippery rocks, and lay soaking and starving, while his companions went back down to the inn.

A sheep's cry falls like a stone. (SLPR, 74)

This is undoubtedly one of Thomas's most uncharacteristic pieces as a prose writer, for it reads like fiction, fiction inhabited by insecurity, of which the uncanny is evidently a part. As Thomas draws back from the mountains, they lose their singular identity and morph into many different things. At one moment, they are "soaring shoulders above the narrow valley," and just as suddenly become "a long wave that threatens but never falls." From another perspective, they are "towering, smudging the horizon" and yet also "the ramparts of old castles with the sky smoking, red." Thomas can never settle on a definition, and his response towards them all seems confirmed in his assertion that: "The passes are deep, dark and entered in fear" (SLPR, 74). Here, the dichotomy between nature and the human is constantly played out. In "Café Scene," MacDiarmid experiences similar distortion, in noting that "All sorts of little everyday things, disproportioned and bedevilled, were picked out by his eyes as if in a spirit of capricious and cruel caricature" (AFS, 21). He goes on to explain in detail those 'familiar' things that threaten him:

That sewing-machine now – a standard make, a world-famous machine, why had it afflicted him with such an agitated and exaggerated sense of its infinite clicking, throbbing capacity to irritate just as if his nerves had been passed endlessly under the needle stitching every little quivering bit of sentience into some fantastic pattern of wanton agony? . . . The flaming effrontery of a bunch of cheap roses, brutally red! The hot offensive dampness of an afternoon edition! (AFS, 21)

In the same way that MacDiarmid here experiences unease with the seemingly ‘familiar’ surroundings and their strange, unusual impact on his thinking, Thomas, also, throughout “The Mountains,” encounters a series of visions that impress on him the sense of his individuality, loneliness and terrifying human-ness. Of the dangers of the rocks he writes: “One day some William Jones will pass that way in his new car. It will fall and kill him” (SLPR, 74). And yet the tone here is remarkably passive, as if Thomas acknowledges the necessity of such death, man’s destruction through nature, as a kind of retribution for man’s own destruction of nature through the machine. There is also the sudden self-awareness the mountains cause, the realisation of the frailty of the human individual in face of such natural, impregnable forces: “Loneliness comes, the fear of falling. Life looks into the eyes of death, and time is enormous, unaware of the human” (SLPR, 75). In this picture, he is suddenly aware of his own insignificance, and yet, as he does so, becomes intensely aware of his ‘self’ in the process. The piece continues with its dark imagery, in describing the lakes as “cold and deep: terrible wounds the water has filled

out but not healed” (SLPR, 76) and questioning “how many have fallen to their death in reaching for the trembling petals just out of range?” (SLPR, 77). The ultimate fear comes in realising that “This mountain destroys in its own way” (SLPR, 79). Here, Thomas is small, insignificant, having no power, feeling, like MacDiarmid “every little quivering bit of sentience” turning into a “fantastic pattern of wanton agony” (AFS, 21).

However, moving away from the despair and insignificance he feels earlier on in the essay, he all of a sudden, when he reaches the summit, becomes aware of his selfhood and individuality in a positive way. He experiences an uncharacteristically confident moment in which he states “What are death, danger? This is the top of the world and this is I; there is nothing else, no living being.” He goes on to remark playfully that “This is what it is to be God” (SLPR, 77). But it is not long before the feeling of confidence, of familiarity, of an assertive selfhood fail him. Soon enough, Thomas is again unsure of what is real, strong, or solid, almost like the rocks of the mountain “when everything begins to come away in the hand” (SLPR, 77). Here he begins to become aware once more of his own humanity, and subsequently, corporeality:

And then the old ache in the mind begins, the restlessness of the bone. You begin tossing small stones into a hollow, flicking them one by one off the nail. How many years to live? The blood begins to cool; there is formication of the skin. You get up and walk about, loth to leave yet knowing you can't stay. It is all self now: the needs of the body, the flesh anxious for itself. The exultation has worn off.

(SLPR, 77)

Thomas's assertion that 'It is all self' is interesting, serving a stark contrast with his previous suggestion of exultation 'this is I; there is nothing else.' The latter passage undoes the first, in that it demonstrates Thomas's unease with his own corporeal existence, believing the 'I' to be symptomatic of a greater, spiritual reality. Again, the problem here seems to be Thomas having to acknowledge his own humanness, and acknowledging that it is this very humanness that he finds most 'familiar.' His avowal of this is seen in his comment that "it is a familiar place now, and carries its human stain" (SLPR, 77). And in realising this 'human stain' the spiritual essence dissolves: "The first man greets you casually, as though you were not God" (SLPR, 78). Thomas is thus caught between the familiar and unfamiliar realms of the body and the spirit, and yet remains dislocated, caught between the two – perceiving both and yet belonging to neither. Once again, one is reminded of Freud lost in the realm of the Uncanny – "splitting into controlling narrator and helpless protagonist" (Uncanny, 134).

In this mysterious setting of "The Mountains", the house Thomas refers to is always threatened by strange presences from the outside: "This is the house the stranger comes to: knocking at the door at night" (SLPR, 78). Here he perceives himself as the stranger, wanting access to the homely comforts of the house. While he remains the stranger, therefore, he is also denied knowledge of the surrounding natural world, and its many secrets. He notes that: "To the natives it is no surprise. The mountain is not a dead thing: they have heard it breathing. Through all time it lies and waits" (SLPR, 78). Here again is the notion of belonging, the instinctive knowledge possessed by the natives, one that is lost to the outsider, and Thomas here craves to be the knowledgeable native, to be known, to be familiar to these people. "There is a sudden hunger for voices," Thomas

asserts, “for location, for identity in this vague grey” (SLPR, 79). Thomas wishes to be recognised and acknowledged, not merely to blend in easily with his surroundings. He chastises himself: “You should have spoken to the farmer, told him where you were going, who you were. Anonymity is for the towns, the packed thorough-fares” (SLPR, 79). He manifests a fear of anonymity, a fear that in not telling the farmer who he was, where he was going, his very purpose, his very intention is placed somehow under threat. He becomes caught in the fear of non-existence, of annihilation, the fear that whatever identity he may have has little, or no significance: “On the blank wall he casts no shadow” (SLPR, 79).

It is worth noting, at this point, that ‘The Mountains’ is also a specifically cultural vision, that is, like Thomas’s later prose piece, “Abercuawg”, demonstrative of purity, of a possibility of wholeness of being that connects cultural identity with spirituality and the natural, primitive, rural community. As W. Moelwyn Merchant has emphasised, Thomas sees that “Snowdonia is not primarily here a place to visit; it is a place for living.”<sup>177</sup> As Thomas writes towards the end of “The Mountains,” such a place becomes representative of the exact home he seeks:

...to live near mountains is to be in touch with Eden, with lost childhood. These are the summer pastures of the Celtic people...This is the world they went up into on May Day with their flocks from *yr hendre*, the winter house, to *yr hafod*, the shieling. They spent long days here, swapping *englynion* over the peat cutting (SLPR, 81-82).

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<sup>177</sup> W. Moelwyn Merchant 77.



Here, for Thomas, is the vision of spiritual and cultural perfection and, although he must acknowledge the fact that it is a way of life “in ruins,” he feels that the cultural essence has been preserved: “the hill remains, keeping its perennial freshness” (SLPR, 82). The eternity symbolised by the natural landscape around him proves reassuring, and is able to rid him of those uncanny, disquieting elements. Towards the end of the piece, Thomas finds reassurance in his own insignificant status, for he is however able to conceive of himself as part of a higher, more universal structure. The fact that the owl’s cry symbolises a period “before man came,” and that it will “re-echo after he has gone, a cry that only the mountain and the moon will outlast” (SLPR, 82) awakens within him a feeling of elation, of spiritual completion.

As Thomas vacillates between a sense of belonging, and a sense of ‘unhomely’ distance, he is once more engaged in the construction of himself within the cultural context, inscribing the “need” to belong, a need that results, ultimately, in incessant questioning of his own authenticity. “It is a country to be abroad in,” he relates of “The Mountains,” “greetings in a strange tongue or sly smiles from over the hedge” (SLPR, 98). In recalling Thomas’s attraction to the ‘alien,’ it would seem that this foreignness, and the feeling of being ‘abroad,’ is a necessary part of his experience of Wales and Welsh life. Here is the ideal to which he must aspire, the place that “is so still at times; they can hear the peregrine on the ledge chattering; *y gwalch glas*” (SLPR, 98). Here again, Thomas’s intrafamilial reference manifests his familiarity and ease with the setting, and recalls the proximity to nature he also feels representative of a proximity to culture, and to an ‘essence’ of being. At the end of the narration, he is once again ‘inside’ the familial, and it is those outside the rural ideal he may now conceive of as ‘strangers.’

“Let the stranger, if he will / Have his way with the Glen,” writes Thomas, for he wishes to live his cultural ideal, away from the external, mechanised world, secluded “In the heather, In the heather” (SLPR, 105).

What manifests itself particularly clearly in the comparative study of the texts discussed is that a search for national identity, in the case of both, is inextricably linked to a vaster challenging of the self, and that ‘constructing the self,’ continuously and repetitively, is a necessary process of identification. As John Baglow writes of MacDiarmid:

Saying “I am a Scot” seems to substitute one uncertainty for another. That his fellow countrymen are continually attacked for not being Scottish enough, or for not being Scottish at all, or for not even being human is a clue to the fact that MacDiarmid’s struggle is existential, that the problem of “being a Scot” is felt to be uniquely his. Being a Scot, it is often implied or explicitly stated in his work, means being an outsider in contemporary Scotland.<sup>178</sup>

Baglow proposes a complex paradox. In attempting to belong to a particular cultural community, in feeling that a linguistic and cultural dimension, whether it is Scots or Welsh, is integral to one’s sense of identity, one somehow undoes the security of that very identity. In personalising the national struggle, as MacDiarmid and Thomas undoubtedly do, the struggle becomes insular and introspective. MacDiarmid, for example, tries to construct and identify himself in terms of the culture that surrounds him,

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<sup>178</sup> Baglow 35.

and yet, as he comes up against discrepancies in this identity, it is the self that is ultimately challenged, the very notion of 'unbelonging' somehow intensifying his separateness. As Baglow goes on to explain, MacDiarmid "is never content merely to 'be Scottish' but clearly feels a deep need to define explicitly what that is."<sup>179</sup> As in the discourse of the uncanny, the familiar suddenly becomes threatening and unfamiliar, the previously confident self becoming tenuous and insecure. MacDiarmid, in re-familiarising himself with Scottish history and culture, thus realises how distanced Scottish identity is from the 'Celtic' ideal.

During this particular stage in his career, Thomas could also be said to be constructing himself in terms of a 'Celtic' ideal, derived mainly from MacDiarmid's ideology, and to be experiencing the same difficulties of 'self' as a result. He craves both the "dear, familiar" aspect of Scottish culture which MacDiarmid presents, and the abjuration of the "rose of all the world" in favour of the 'authentic' cultural symbol. And yet he, too, finds it problematic to equate his own ideology with the 'Anglo-Welsh' situation he finds in Wales, and has also to confront his own inability to create the kind of "Synthetic English/Vernacular" that is proposed through MacDiarmid's work. He thus becomes caught in an unfamiliar world 'on both sides of the alien' as he perseveres with constructing his identity, "The Mountains" reflecting the spiritual ideal to which he must continuously aspire in order to reinforce his cultural 'self.'

Another problem facing Thomas as he attempted to develop a cultural identity that was "a mixture of Welsh imagination and Scottish intellectualism,"<sup>180</sup> was the fact

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<sup>179</sup> Baglow 35.

<sup>180</sup> Thomas, "A Welsh View" 604.

that the national, cultural 'collective' of the present-day Wales was perhaps already too British-identified for Thomas's liking. "It is easy to love one's own nation," states Thomas, "But who can sacrifice himself to such a vague and disinterested concept as contemporary British society?"<sup>181</sup> The notion of 'sacrificing himself' here is interesting, for it again emphasises the fact that Thomas sees cultural identity as inseparable from his own, personal identity. The 'self,' for Thomas as much as MacDiarmid, cannot be aligned with any intimation of anything 'British' or 'Anglo' and thus inevitably both poets find themselves increasingly on the periphery. In attempting to construct themselves around their respective cultures, it appears that Thomas and MacDiarmid became engaged rather in a perpetual process of self-construction, in which it is the 'self' that is most in need of being rendered homely and familiar. To conclude, it is worth bearing in mind the words of John Baglow (and perhaps to substitute "Thomas" for "MacDiarmid", and "Wales" for "Scotland") when he observes of MacDiarmid that

He is unable to convince us that he puts Scotland before himself. Scotland, as continually revealed by his grappling with it, remains so much of a question mark that any such subordination remains theoretical. Scottishness too becomes an object of search.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Thomas, "A Welsh View" 601.

<sup>182</sup> Baglow 43.

## 3

**“Scurrilous thoughts”<sup>183</sup>: The unhomely moment in the political poetry of R.S. Thomas**

To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the ‘unhomely’ be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. . . . In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting. The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow.<sup>184</sup>

The uncanny has to do with a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality. (Uncanny, 2)

They are a homely people; they live in their kitchen. They have their front parlour, of course, and without the language the traveller will never get beyond it.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> “To whom must a priest confess scurrilous thoughts?” ERS 52.

<sup>184</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994) 9. Further references will be given parenthetically in the text (LC).

<sup>185</sup> R.S. Thomas, “The Welsh Parlour,” *The Listener* Vol. LIX. No. 1503. (January 16, 1958): 115.

In his introduction to The Location of Culture, Homi K. Bhabha explores the term “unhomely” in relation to its effects on the post-colonial subject. It is seen to be a condition linked to one’s personal experience of home; to be unhomely is to feel not-at-home in a particular experience, often ironically to feel not-at-home in one’s *homeland*. It is also an experience that disturbs the fixed margins or boundaries of one’s world, as “the borders between home and world become confused” (LC, 9), and one becomes unable to dissociate one’s ‘home’ from its political and cultural context. It is, as Bhabha asserts, when “the personal-*is*-the-political; the world-*in*-the-home” (LC, 11), when the experience of living is inseparable from the process of integrating, when one’s private sphere becomes contaminated by one’s ‘public’ dimension. To be, to exist, is in this context to exist either as part of something - or not, as the case may be - often within the context of the cultural collective. The unhomely lends itself particularly well to the post-colonial situation, for it becomes an useful means of considering the complex displacements and feelings of dislocation experienced by those in colonised, minority cultures. The colonial subject is often one who becomes estranged from ‘home,’ and from an undisturbed authentic life within the native culture, following the domination of a colonial order.

It is not merely coincidental that Bhabha marks this destabilising notion as occurring ‘uncannily,’ for this is an experience rooted in uncanny feeling. Colonisation confuses one’s origins, the very root of one’s identity, and the world becomes an ambivalent, nebulous and insecure place. The uncanny is, as Nicholas Royle states, “to do with a strangeness of framing and borders”; it is that which dissolves any sense of fixed knowledge, and causes the disruption of a perceived ‘concrete’ world. Suddenly

one must question where world ends, and self begins. Can the two be separated? In the unhomely moment, nothing is secure.

To whom does one 'belong' culturally - to oneself, or to a nation-state and cultural collective? As such questions are raised, one is reminded of Royle's use of the unhomely, and his description of the uncanny as "homeliness uprooted, the revelation of something unhomely at the heart of hearth and home" (Uncanny, 1). The notion of "roots" is here crucial, for it suggests that the unhomely disturbs the essence of one's homeliness, the very thing that ties one to a location or community, the sense of security, the feeling that one 'belongs.' The unhomely, in this context of when "the public and the private become part of each other" (LC, 9), becomes again a point at which familiarity is threatened by a sudden unfamiliarity, and one becomes unclear and unsure of one's national/cultural identity. To use another analogy, it could be viewed in terms of one's individual identity becoming confused with the sense of collective identity; it is, to borrow Thomas's term in his lecture "Abercuawg," akin to the ambivalent point at which "the few grow into many" (SLPR, 129). Although not a direct parallel, it certainly implies the same kind of nebulousness and disturbing uncertainty involved in being incorporated into a collective. Within the realm of the unhomely, the subject finds it difficult to distinguish between his/her 'own' singular identity, and the plural, collective identity of the nation or cultural community, so that the action of the collective has subsequent bearing on the individual and vice versa. The subsequent disorientation comes in realising that in attempting to fix a singular identity *within* a plural identity, one is continuously open and vulnerable to changes, one responds, not to one's own personal instinctual impulses, but to those of a group, to a collective consciousness. It is perhaps

no wonder that the discourse of the unhomely is, as Bhabha would have it, “as divided as it is disorientating” (LC, 9), for it is a place where identity is constantly shifting, and where “our public image comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities.” (LC, 4) One becomes aware of multitudes of identities *within* oneself, multitudes that are a response, in part, to a conception of oneself as a cultural being.

The unhomely is also characterised by liminality. Liminality, in cultural terms, is symptomatic of inbetween-ness; it is to be caught between-the-binary. As the unhomely disturbs and disrupts simplistic polarities such as Self/Other, Black/White, liminality comes in its wake – liminality being the condition one enters when one is ‘neither one thing *nor* the other.’ While the unhomely exposes prescriptive terms, showing how binaries cannot exist as pre-given, fixed, identities, but are destined, at least in Bhabha’s hypothesis, to become radically, continually disarranged, liminality also proves that to be in-between such distinctions is also a positive mode of cultural representation.

On Bhabha’s terms, the post-colonial subject must learn to disband all that is fixed and given in one’s sense of cultural identity, in order to condition one’s own cultural ‘difference.’ “Social differences are not simply given to experience through an already authenticated cultural tradition,” writes Bhabha, “they are the signs of the emergence of community envisaged as a project” (LC, 3). The cultural collective, therefore, exists before one as a visualised identity, a conceptualisation more than an *actualisation*, “at once a vision and a construction” (LC, 9). While the post-colonial subject, therefore, can construct his/her identity around such preconceived notions of cultural tradition, it is nevertheless a fatalistic construction, for it adheres to something that is, in itself, transitory and tenuous. Just as the uncanny confuses the margins of



one's 'self,' one's 'own' property, all that is known and given, in cultural terms, becomes disrupted, and exposed as a construction. The post-colonial, unhomely moment evidently gives rise to questions of 'authentic' culture, as cultural identity is often that which is 'created' through colonisation – an artificial construction that does not adequately reflect the experience of those in colonised, minority cultures. The moment of the "unhomely" is also to do, therefore, with artificial construction, with a sense that one's 'given' reality is not one's 'true' or 'authentic' experience.

Bhabha's discourse does however allow for the possibility of constructing one's identity *around* the concept of the unhomely, and it is also predominantly a discourse which allows for 'difference' of the most illuminating kind. While the unhomely, and the liminal, is to be caught in-between, this in-between space becomes instrumental in constructing a positive identity. This kind of liminality Bhabha defines as an "interstitial passage" (LC, 4), that allows the subject to develop an identity that, although caught in-between the dominant and minority culture and perhaps considered 'outside' the cultural experience, is nevertheless the subject's 'own' identity. Bhabha uses the analogy of the stairwell to demonstrate the positive machinations of such a position:

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between

fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy. (LC, 4)

The stairwell here becomes a motif for the position of the post-colonial subject 'caught' between cultural experiences. As it suggests, such identities are perhaps less stable than those 'fixed' on either floor/culture, and can only be fixed relatively, as the post-colonial subject attempts to come to terms with the unhomely position. This allows for the development of several identities in the in-between space, again disturbing any simplistic binary distinctions. The term 'hybridity' conjures up the notion of multiple identities, linking once more with the uncanny, when one considers the uncanny to be an experience that engenders feelings of doubleness and multiplicity within oneself, the notion of losing control of one's 'known' stable, singular identity. "It may thus be construed as a foreign body within oneself," as Royle states, "even the experience of oneself *as* a foreign body" (Uncanny, 2). As the postcolonial subject becomes prey to multitudes of identity, one's cultural identity becomes a means of recognising otherness within oneself.

However, the aim of this chapter is not to dwell unduly on notions of "hybridity" but rather to consider the various processes of social and cultural alienation that engage with such a position, in short, to look at the unhomely moment within post-colonial situations, as one that disrupts identity. It could be suggested, in many ways, that this unhomely moment, as Bhabha himself suggests in referring to Freud, is a kind of postcolonial 'version' of the uncanny – the moment at which strangeness enters. Colonisation, is, after all, uncanny. It is an unnatural force that disrupts and contests equilibrium and equality, making both parties – coloniser and colonised - unsure of who

they are as they become dichotomised. Colonisation often produces such estranging effects as making the subject unsure of his/her position, while often the power balance between coloniser/colonised becomes confused as they attempt to locate their cultural difference. While post-colonial theory is a discourse that attempts to exemplify and clarify such position, it is also in itself a discourse that is inherently ambiguous. As Homi K. Bhabha states, the term 'post' is used as a marker of both closure and continuity, as the very use of the term 'post' manifests the "trope of our times to locate culture in the realm of the 'beyond'" (LC, 1). It is 'beyond' in the sense that it is neither in the present nor in the future but rather 'elsewhere.' Similar to the uncanny/canny dichotomy, that which constitutes 'home' or 'rooted-ness' in a cultural context is persistently plagued or 'haunted' by its 'other,' the unhomely, the uprooted. Bhabha writes:

In the *fin de siècle*, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion. For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond': an exploratory, restless movement caught so well in the French rendition of the words *au-dela* – here and there, on all sides, *fort/da*, hither and thither, back and forth. (LC, 1)

In our contemporary world, culture itself can be representative of that which is uncanny and canny, representing simultaneously an at-home-ness and a not-at-home-ness. Objectivity and subjectivity subsequently also become confused, and in asserting one's place within culture one also incessantly marks one's difference from it. Bhabha's point

here is that in a post-Christian, post-modern world, cultural security, even for those “safely” posited in non-colonial nations, such as England and America, has become a thing of the past. For instance, the constant display of nationality that is often seen in England and America, in the constant display of the English and American flag, in fact point towards an insecurity, the fear that if something is not constantly repeated, it loses its significance.

Within a colonised society, however, culture is altogether more problematic. Bhabha argues that “the social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation” (LC, 2). Again this relates to the uncanny, and it is possible to see how, in a cultural sense, one’s attempted integration into culture is perhaps one of the most startling awakenings to the alien and unfamiliar within oneself. Here, the very notion of individuality and subjectivity which surges in one’s search for cultural belonging is, in a sense, a deviation from the homogenised collective, and therefore, an *estranging* experience. As will be discussed later on in the chapter, R.S. Thomas’s notion “it is no small blessing, this sense of belonging”<sup>186</sup> was, in a cultural and psychological sense, responsible for the several instances of the uncanny within both his life and work. It is this notion of “belonging” *around which*, and not *within which*, he attempts to construct and deconstruct himself.

To be neither “here nor there,” in a cultural sense, is an useful way of considering the culturally-insecure position adopted by Thomas, especially during the sixties and seventies. At this time, Thomas sought the ideal of the rural, simple, Welsh-speaking, imaginative and spiritually alive “Wales,” only to find that the reality was far more

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<sup>186</sup> Transcript of “A Time for Carving,” BBC Welsh Home Service. 11 April 1957.

fractured and mundane, that the ideal, in short, did not exist. While he had romanticised Welsh culture as being “open” to him through his learning of the Welsh language, he found rather that, at least in his terms, there was scarcely a Welsh culture for him to move inside. While he was able, therefore, to have a relationship with the Welsh language culture that existed, as texts such as “Abercuawg” makes clear, he was still urging it on to a better sense of what it might be, disillusioned with contemporary Welsh language culture, in face of his own ideals. He seems therefore to have been caught, very much, in-between cultural representation, unsure of his position – unable and unwilling at the same time to return to his Anglicised, bourgeois roots. It is worth considering Bhabha’s assertion of the liminal realm of the “beyond” in this context:

Being in the ‘beyond,’ then, is to inhabit an intervening space, as any dictionary will tell you. But to dwell ‘in the beyond’ is also, as I have shown, to be part of a revisionary time, a return to the present to redescribe our cultural contemporaneity; to reinscribe our human, historic commonality; *to touch the future on its hither side*. In that sense, then, the intervening space ‘beyond’, becomes a space for intervention in the here and now. (LC, 7)

As Bhabha, suggests, then, “to dwell in the beyond” is not simply a condition of negative ambivalence, it is also a position in which one becomes able to reconstruct one’s identity. It is a position evolved in light of one’s own personal vision, corresponding to one’s *actual* experience of that culture, rather idealistic and romanticised notions of it. The “beyond” is an interesting theoretical concept to keep in mind as one approaches the

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political work of R.S. Thomas, for it is arguably the realm of the “beyond” that Thomas himself inhabits, in the absence of any clear identification with present-day Wales. Such a position engenders what Bhabha calls “invention and intervention” (LC, 7), so that, in Thomas’s case, in order to assert himself, to ‘redescribe his cultural contemporaneity’ as it were, he must redefine Wales on his own terms, in order to determine what place he himself has within that nation. His poetry and his prose therefore become the means of reconstructing his cultural identity, and it is no surprise that it often disrupts the margins of time, past, present and future. “Such art does not merely recall the past,” writes Bhabha, but “the ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living” (LC, 7). Bhabha’s notion here of the past-present implies that the post-colonial subject, in engaging with his/her present day cultural reality, must also take into account the past history of that nation, history becoming the means by which to measure present day cultural reality. Through this, the subject can transcend such reality, and aspire to a higher ideal, a strategy particularly relevant in the case of R.S. Thomas.

As argued in Chapter 2, Thomas first becomes the victim of uncanny feelings in realising that that which he once perceived as his fixed, given identity (Anglicised and bourgeois, an identity to which he is bound through his upbringing) is an identity that no longer ‘represents’ him. In attempting to disengage, he embarks on a period of reconstructing his identity, i.e. learning Welsh, familiarising himself with Welsh literature, and finding cultural ‘role models,’ as is exemplified in his identification with ‘Celtic’ writers such as Hugh MacDiarmid. However, what remains to be explored is the means by which Thomas can actively, personally identify himself with Wales in the form of the cultural collective. To what extent can he combat also the sense of unhomeliness

that prevents him from ‘belonging’ to a cultural collective, to engage the ‘singular’ comfortably with the ‘plural’? Bearing in mind the fact that “the uncanny is intimately entwined in language, with how we conceive and represent what is happening within ourselves, to ourselves, to the world” (Uncanny, 2), it is interesting to analyse how Thomas’s identity develops *subsequent* to his Welsh ‘awareness,’ and how his poetry reflects those changes. Through a consideration of his most ‘political’ period as a poet, it is possible to argue that Thomas, in ‘entering’ Wales as a Welsh speaker, becomes further ‘unhomed,’ further estranged from himself. In attempting to ‘fix’ his identity, ironically, his sense of liminality intensifies, as the uncanny once more comes into play. He is displaced from what he feels to be the essential characteristic of his own idealistic Welsh identity, i.e. simplicity, intimacy and homeliness, discovering that, while “They [the Welsh] are a homely people,”<sup>187</sup> it is only conditionally that he is allowed to enter their homes. As he becomes unhomed, his political poetry engages fiercely with this sense of marginality, for as Thomas asserts in The Echoes Return Slow, it becomes necessary for him to “confess scurrilous thoughts” (ERS, 18), primarily through the medium of his poetry.

If, in Manafon, Thomas had experienced a reality far removed from the cultural ideal of the *gwerin*, in Eglwys-fach he was confronted with yet another stark reality: this time, in the dissipation of a linguistic ideal. By the time he had moved to Eglwys-fach in 1954, Thomas was a fluent Welsh-speaker, who had already published Welsh-language articles and essays, and who was now more determined than ever to make use of the Welsh language in his everyday life. He wanted to, as it were, “travel beyond the front

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<sup>187</sup> Thomas, “The Welsh Parlour” 119.

parlour” of Welsh identity, in order to be truly “inside,” to belong to the “real” and “true Wales,” to construct for himself a living Welsh-language reality. He notes how he had “kept an eye on the Church in Wales papers to see what Welsh-speaking parishes were vacant” (MS, 12), and how Eglwys-fach, at the outset, appeared to conform to the ideal. It was a rural parish, not only “a Welsh area in its appearance” (A, 63) but one which also hosted what Thomas had assumed was a Welsh-speaking community. Thomas chose Eglwys-fach tactically, in response to his own personal needs and corresponding cultural ideals. The move was expected to dissipate those remaining lingering traces of the uncanny, and to move Thomas away from those intimations of “dread and horror” that had been present as he faced the harsh realities of Manafon, and the cultural ignorance of the hill farmers.

Thomas recalls that the move, presumably on a cultural level, “had been a step in the right direction” (MS, 12). He had, after all, moved into what he had perceived as the ‘Welsh-speaking-Wales,’ in Thomas’s eyes, a ‘privileged’ community he had sought entry into since beginning to learn Welsh in the forties. But he experienced ignorance of a different kind in Eglwys-fach, and one that further disabled his Welsh identity. The language itself was not, as he had hoped, the stronghold of the community, but yet again confined to the margins.<sup>188</sup> A few of the parishioners were Welsh-speaking, but the English were in the majority, and their influence was strongly exerted over the parish. Moreover, he faced a particular cultural situation at Eglwys-fach, in which his carefully-constructed ‘ideal’ became unobtainable, and in which he himself appeared an oddity,

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<sup>188</sup> “What he didn’t know before settling there was how weak the Welsh language was in Eglwys-fach” (A, 64).



confined to the margins of the community *because* of his Welsh ideals. Thomas's description of the parish is that:

It was rural and had farms, but there were also a number of residential houses containing retired tea planters, ex-army officers . . . and the villagers themselves, mostly Welsh, but many of them married to English women. There were Welsh services every Sunday and Welsh was spoken in the parish, but the emphasis was on the English Sunday Morning service, which was far better attended (MS, 12).

As is suggested here, there was in Eglwys-fach a specifically English, and essentially imperialist presence, an overpowering colonial mind-set. There is great irony in the fact that Thomas, in attempting to move closer to indigenous Welsh culture, in fact moved directly into a colonised community, deepening his sense of cultural anxiety and alienation. He seems, in this sense, to have fallen into the trap of viewing culture as possessing 'fixed' characteristics, as Bhabha would have it, and to view nationhood as "*pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition" (LC, 2). Recalling the romantic notions of the rural Welsh heartland he had begun forming in such essays as "Dau Gapel," a community full of retired tea planters and ex-army officers, mostly from England, did not exactly correspond to Thomas's notions of the *hendre* and the *hafod* of Welsh-speaking community. "Dau Gapel" refers to the chapel Soar y Mynydd in Ceredigion, and Thomas had the vision that "the very source of Welsh life as it is today is here in the middle of these remote moorlands in Ceredigion. And it is in places of this sort that the soul of the Welshman is formed" (SLPR, 46). Such spiritual ideals, however,

expose the fact that Thomas had constructed for himself a sense of pure, indigenous identity primarily *from the outside*, and there is therefore little wonder that such ideals became near impossible to obtain in reality. Once again, one is reminded of the alienation experienced by the outcast Morgan in The Minister: “You thought you knew them / but they always changed / To something stranger, if you looked closely / Into their faces” (CP, 45). Thomas makes similar assumptions about Eglwys-fach, and it is those assumptions, ultimately, that become the cause of his uncertainty and displacement.

Eglwys-fach did not prove to be a place of poetic inspiration for Thomas. In fact, creatively, he reverted to the landscape of Manafon. He writes that:

Some of the Eglwys-fach people had had the advantage of education and travel and so there was less excuse for their jealousy and small-mindedness . . . so I tended to revert to the Montgomeryshire background for poetic inspiration.

(A, 14)

It seemed that both culturally and creatively, he remained at odds with the community he had hoped would serve to confirm his identity. The cultural world he sought was unsustainable from his present surroundings, and therefore it continued to be sustained in his poetry through the remembered and imagined past of Manafon. In believing ‘culture’ (at least in his definition of culture, as being part of a cultural collective) to be something dynamic and active, it became devastating for him to learn that the Welsh-language community in Eglwys-fach was, in fact, decaying.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that Thomas, during this period began looking back to his Manafon period with a certain nostalgia, now viewing Iago Prytherch

and his kind as somehow authentic in face of the more alien, inauthentic world of these English, colonially-minded parishioners. In the poem "Absolutions," from the collection Poetry for Supper (1958), for example, Thomas finds that he must now ask Prytherch's forgiveness for his previous poetic description of him:

It was you who was right the whole time;  
Right in this that the day's end  
Finds you still in the same field  
In which you started, your soul made strong  
By the earth's incense, the wind's song. (CP, 92)

Here Thomas expresses his new-found admiration for Iago Prytherch, one spurred by the fact that Prytherch, for all his seeming discrepancies and flaws, is, in fact, heroic in his constancy, a willing, natural servant of the earth who desires no more than to live his life according to the "earth incense, the wind's song." There may be a sense of guilt implicit in the poem also, especially with regard to the fact that Thomas has, in fact, moved away from Manafon, in search of something "better," more fulfilling, and more suited to his ideal. However, he sees that this has been a rash decision, for:

I have worn my soul bare  
On the world's roads, seeking what lay  
Too close for the mind's lenses to see. (CP, 92)

Again, as is characteristic of Thomas, he realises that he has, in fact, moved further away from the ideal. Eglwys-fach, in comparison, is a place in which the natural surroundings are entirely disregarded, in favour of a more genteel, and yet at the same time, more staid, inanimate existence. In the poem "The Parish," he laments how there is: "Nothing to tell in their spick rooms' / Discipline how with its old violence / Grass raged under the door" (CP 101). In contrast, Thomas asserts, almost proudly: "But you knew it, farmer; your hand / Had felt its power, if not your heart / Its loveliness" (CP, 101). Prytherch is seen as

one able to connect with the primitive sources, while the affected, detached Eglwys-fach parishioners merely want to preserve their materialist, class-sensitive society. Thomas is thus suddenly awakened to the sincerity and simplicity of the Manafon life, realising, belatedly, how he could have engaged more fully with this community during his time there.

A similar tone of nostalgia is present in the poem "Truth" from the later collection Bread of Truth (1963). Again, what is emphasised is the farmer's unyielding, constant position, sometimes seen quite literally: "He was in the fields, when I set out. / He was in the fields, when I came back" (CP, 143). As Thomas feels his own identity, and sense of community, crumbling, Iago Prytherch (although not explicitly named in this particular poem) once more appears before him as the only 'known' marker of stability:

His arm half  
Lifted was more to ward off  
My foolishness. You will return,  
He intimated; the heart's roots  
Are here under this black soil  
I labour at. (CP, 143)

Thomas has in one sense already 'returned' for he now sees Prytherch as representing the 'truth' that he had hoped to find during his cultural quest, and more to the point, in his move to the supposedly-Welsh community of Eglwys-fach. Rather, he finds that the authentic life was in the place he has just left, able to see this far more clearly having assumed also some distance from it. For "the truth's here, / Closer than the world will confess, / In this bare bone of life that I pick" (CP, 143), states the farmer, also taunting the Thomas who has recently arrived at the 'untruthful' Eglwys-fach.

Thomas's account of his Eglwys-fach period has a strange, haunting quality, recorded in The Echoes Return Slow as a series of disorientating illusions. He

experiences confusion: “Was the sea calling him on or back? It was a false voice in the trees” (ERS, 44), and as Thomas is urged on to find his ideal, he asks:

With the end  
nowhere, the travelling  
all, how better to get  
there than on one’s knees? (ERS, 45)

With the notion of the “travelling / all” one is reminded once again of Thomas’s perpetual self-questioning, and how the metaphor of the journey becomes integral to his search for identity. He has journeyed ‘away’ from Prytherch and his kind in order to find completion, and yet this journey is incessantly incomplete. It is, on Bhabha’s terms, “a complex, on-going negotiation” (LC, 2). One is reminded also of Frantz Fanon’s assertion in Black Skin, White Masks, also cited in Bhabha’s study: “In the world in which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself” (LC, 8). In a cultural dimension, Fanon states that the subject is always coming across new modes of representation, new ways of interpreting the self *to the self*. Fanon also argues that “it is by going beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis that I will initiate my cycle of freedom” (LC, 9), suggesting that the subject will only be free when it can be considered also as separate from orthodox notions of culture. In the same way, R.S. Thomas, in relying on the “historical, instrumental hypothesis,” in the form of the cultural ideal, the “true Wales of my imagination,” has not yet fully accounted for his own *differences*, and the possibility of having to construct himself *against* the ideal. One is reminded also of Thomas’s assertion, in an interview in 1974: “I felt I’d never be able to get anywhere until I had learned the language, which would then open up any part of Wales that I felt drawn to go to.”<sup>189</sup> Again his cultural identity is viewed in terms of a journey – himself unable to “get

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anywhere” until he has the right linguistic credentials. As Wales, in contrast, appeared closed to him, there was also a possibility that Thomas would be able to construct his identity in light of his own marginal position – that is, to construct himself in terms of difference rather than homogeneity.

Illusions of artifice are a feature of his autobiographical account of his time at Eglwys-fach. The society around him, the ex-military, ex-colonial, middle-class English society from which he wishes to distance himself, haunts him with its automaton-like behaviour and values. He recalls:

And this one with his starched lip,  
his medals, his meanness;  
his ability to live cheap off dear things.

And his china-eyed children  
with their crêpe-de-Chine hair,  
product of a chill nursery,

borrowing nastiness from  
each other, growing harder and thinner  
on the days’ diet of yawns and smirks.

His wife and his friends’ wives,  
Reputations congealing about their mouths,  
cutlery after the prandial remarks. (ERS, 47)

It is a community of the synthetic, of unreality, of English bourgeois codes and values that cannot be penetrated. Again, this kind of existence provokes in Thomas the feeling of his own inadequacy, that often gives way to a nightmare of annihilation. What impact can he possibly have, as a priest, on such people as these? Such anxiety reaches its nightmarish uncanny conclusion in the following passage:

An obsession with nothing  
Distinguished him from his co-  
thinkers. From dreaming about

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<sup>189</sup> Transcript for “More Poetry at Large 4.” BBC Radio 3, 1974.

it, he woke up to its immense  
 presence, to a consciousness  
 of when he was not, to  
 the equal certainty  
 of his being extinguished. (ERS, 49)

This passage is extremely telling, for it shows Thomas once again as being struck by an anxiety of self. Here, the sense of nothingness is even more acute, for he is haunted by the absence of his own ideal. His relationship with God also becomes fused with displeasure and disgust. Thomas is ‘outside’ the experience once more: “God . . . / now glaciates me / in the draught out of his tomb” (ERS, 61). Thomas seems once more uneasily posited outside his own experience. He is also haunted by the voices of the congregation and their insubstantial talk, even when he seeks to go off alone into the countryside: “Yet on still days the air was as clerestories in which the overtones of gossiping voices would not fade” (ERS, 58).

The Echoes Return Slow contains excerpts that undercut the previous *positive* assertions made by Thomas concerning Eglwys-fach, that again reminds one of the propensity of this unorthodox autobiography to contain certain ‘slippages’ of Thomas’s unconscious. While, in his “Autobiographical Essay,” Thomas asserts that his move to Eglwys-fach, initially, “had been a step in the right direction” (MS, 12), it is an altogether more bleak perspective he offers in The Echoes Return Slow: “He was reminded all too soon that journeying is not necessarily in the right direction” (ERS, 44). Finding himself among parishioners who were intellectually more capable than those at Manafon, he found himself disappointed at their lack of interest in cultural affairs, and in their lack of sympathy for Welsh concerns. Their ignorance therefore could not be excused, as it had been in Manafon:

There are sins rural and sins social. Does a god discriminate? Education is the refinement of evil. The priest is required to make his way along glass-sown walls. It is easier to divide a parish than to unite it, except on Sundays. The smell of the farmyard was replaced by the smell of the decayed conscience (ERS, 46).

While in Manafon, Thomas had been greatly disturbed by a harsh, rural way of life, it is as if, in comprehending what is again an essentially bourgeois, Anglicised existence in Eglwysfach, he is gradually coming to the realisation that he has somehow moved even further away from his ideal. Here is not, as he would have hoped, the Welsh-speaking, rural ideal, but the “decayed conscience,” a morbid identity that is inanimate, and closed off with regard to its cultural potential. It is also, eerily, his own conscience that he refers to, the way he is pressed to compromise in order to keep the peace.

If, for Thomas, there is something “frightening” in perceiving the existence of the Manafon farmer, then there is undoubtedly something equally, if not *more*, frightening about the ‘unreality’ represented by those cold, unsympathetic parishioners he encountered in Eglwys-fach. This can be seen in many of his autobiographical assertions concerning Eglwys-fach, that he feels these people to be in a sense artificial, their behaviour towards him a kind of masquerade. As he writes in Autobiographies, “But the question stayed with him: what kind of people were these deep down?” (A, 75). There is a sense of much of their ‘true’ natures being covert, hidden from view: “behind closed doors, as it were, and in private conversations, the habit breaks down, and malice and jealousy and cruelty come to light” (A, 75). Thomas views the people of Eglwys-fach as



those who are willing to put on a performance for his benefit, to engage in a kind of myth of respectability, while renouncing their Christianity when outside his company.

The poem “The Parish,” for example, collected in Tares in 1961, undoubtedly relates to the horror of the Eglwys-fach period, as Thomas communicates his feelings of estrangement as a priest within the community:

There was a part of the parish that few knew.  
They lived in houses on the main road  
To God, as they thought, managing primly  
The day’s dirt, bottling talk  
Of birth and marriage in cold eyes (CP, 101).

Here Thomas is most probably referring to Eglwys-fach: for one thing, it corresponds with the geographical details given by Thomas in “No-One” that this “was a village on the main road” (A, 63). Also telling is the fact that it reproduces the same detached, cold feeling that is also present in his autobiographical account of the period, given in The Echoes Return Slow. There is the notion of a staid, lifeless community – who “manage primly / The day’s dirt, / bottling talk” (CP, 101) – therefore also hiding things from view, letting them fester and brood, rather than being open and honest. Thomas himself was also under immense pressure from this community, as is demonstrated by the poem “The Priest.” Certainly, the violence suggested in the following extract suggests how alienated and detached he may have felt from his congregation:

Priests have a long way to go.  
The people wait for them to come  
To them over the broken glass  
Of their vows, making them pay  
With their sweat’s coinage for their correction (CP, 196).

The sheer imagery here, the brutal thought of the Priest crossing the “broken glass” and of having to “pay” for his ‘corrective’ methods again emphasise that in Eglwys-fach he

had come across a hardship of a different kind, in those uncompromising, mock-respectable parishioners to whom he had, essentially, to 'prove' himself in order to survive. This gives some intimation of the sheer pain and displacement experienced by Thomas at this time, and his increasing alienation from the community: "Hearts wanting him to come near. / The flesh rejects him" (CP, 196).

Such disillusion provides a motif for the unhomey moment: the familiar, homely world is now devastatingly frightening. In Eglwys-fach, he does not have the comfort of believing that "there is the hush which suggests that it was but a moment ago that life fled" (SLPR, 46), as a result of the harsh conditions of the hill country, the weather, the poor land, the economics. He must rather confront the fact that the house has been 'unhomed' through colonisation. The English had *replaced* the Welsh, and Thomas was now no more than a ghost within his own community - now representative of something archaic and unnatural, rather than something animate, and authentic. In The Echoes Return Slow he expresses a desire to be able to confront these issues more directly, rather than submissively yield to the alienation he feels. He intimates gladiatorial combat: "Once / in the sand it had been his club / against my fish-net" (ERS, 53). Now, however, their social differences become lost in a maze of mock-respectability, and the cold, rationalised subtlety of the colonial community: "Here we exchange / insults civilly" (ERS, 53).

Motifs of colonisation seemed to be extremely prevalent in Eglwys-fach, and everywhere Thomas was 'haunted' by the fact that the Welsh reality he sought – perhaps within Wales in general – was disappearing and decaying. The English bourgeoisie is felt as a menacing presence. "It was a parish of several large houses," Thomas writes, "and

every one of them in the hands of the English, despite the Welsh names on almost all of them” (A, 64). Furthermore, the colonial dichotomy of master / slave is still continuously played as the Welsh become condemned to the position of servants within their own land: “The Welsh who did not farm were only gardeners and maids to these people” (A, 64). However, the Welsh are also seen to be complicit in this. It is implicit in Thomas’s assertion that “even amongst the common folk of the village there had been quite a bit of intermarrying” (A, 64) that he believes that there had been no active attempt on behalf of these people to keep their communities indigenously ‘pure’ or authentic, therefore allowing the English to enter the community and rupture the cultural hierarchy.

In many ways, the parish of Eglwys-fach represented for Thomas the collective consciousness of Wales. Here was a community of Welsh-speakers, for whom Welsh was no more than an occasional social necessity, and whose socially-aspirational values favoured English as a means of expression. When Thomas came amongst them, even by the Welsh-speakers themselves he was considered a “Welsh fanatic.”<sup>190</sup> As Justin Wintle writes of Thomas’s period in Eglwys-fach: “There is the frustrated patriotism, the feeling that to be Welsh is to be pulverized, that one’s territory has been irredeemably taken over.”<sup>191</sup> It is not *within* such a community, therefore, that Thomas is able to construct himself, but necessarily *against* such a community. And yet problematically as its parish priest he cannot entirely disengage himself from its reality, either. It is perhaps also worth noting that in a radio interview, even in 1996, Thomas states, in response to Beti

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<sup>190</sup> Bookmark documentary BBC 2 1986.

<sup>191</sup> Justin Wintle, Furious Interiors: Wales, R.S. Thomas and God (London: Harper Collins, 1996) 290.

George's query: "What do you perceive to be the qualities of the Englishman?" that he answers referring to his period at Eglwys-fach:

I'm not entirely sure. When I was in Eglwys-fach, those in the private school there loved the English, always singing their praises to me, saying this that and the other about them, telling me how well-admired the Englishman is, and I would say to them, well I'd be glad to hear someone apart from the English saying this, for certainly their 'good name' is not as good in other countries apart from England.<sup>192</sup>

It is a telling remark, in that it makes evident how closely connected Eglwys-fach is, in the poet's memory, with varying notions of Englishness, his parishioners at Eglwys-fach representing for the poet an archetype of the self-important Englishman. Later on, in the same interview, Thomas laments how the same community would be split into 'factions': "One faction standing against the other, jealous of each other, and I did find fault in this."<sup>193</sup> This brings to mind, of course, his assertion in The Echoes Return Slow that "It is easier to divide a parish than to unite it" (ERS, 46). Thomas's own personal position within this community troubled him: "it was a strain for me to try to keep the peace between them."<sup>194</sup> In discussing his days at Aberdaron, on the other hand, to which he

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<sup>192</sup> Ed. Ioan Roberts, Beti a'i Phobol 1: Addasiad llyfr o'r sgysiau radio, 1 (Llanrwst: Gwasg Carreg Gwalch, 2002) 74. My translation.

<sup>193</sup> Beti a'i Phobol 92.

<sup>194</sup> Beti a'i Phobol 94.

moved in 1967, Thomas recalls that: “I saw a simplicity there that did not strain me at all. I began to feel homely in their midst.”<sup>195</sup>

The use of the word ‘homely’ here – *cartrefol* – again serves as a reminder of the adverse experience in Eglwys-fach: the unhomely moment, in which Thomas becomes culturally ‘trapped.’ The only definable space left for him to construct himself becomes that very point of the “beyond,” the “liminal,” a fictional space, in a sense, that becomes the means of understanding his cultural dilemma. This entails a confusion of the temporal, and a blurring of the distinctions between past, present and future. “The borderline work of culture demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present” (LC, 7). Bhabha stresses, urging the subject to construct his/her identity from the outside, away from his/her cultural reality.

To live in the unhomely world, Bhabha states, is to crave identification, and also to find a means of re-authenticating a past, the very past that is the root of one’s displaced feelings. In his introduction to The Location of Culture, Bhabha uses Toni Morrison’s Beloved as a case study. Beloved, a novel that re-imagines slave history, is in Bhabha’s view a prime example of how the “unhomely” moment is used in order to forge new histories, and new identities. Morrison shows the blurring of distinction between home and world in the figure of Beloved herself, the ghost of the child murdered by its mother, who returns in order to disturb the order of the house. She becomes the historical signifier that rearranges and disturbs the present, but one that ultimately is used to reveal that the house had not reclaimed its ‘homely’ elements since the end of the slave trade. The

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<sup>195</sup> Beti a’i Phobol 94.

character of *Beloved* is the previously silenced voice of history and familial continuity, and before the cultural identities can truly free themselves from the past slavery, consider themselves 'anew,' and construct a future for themselves, they must first confront and explore the horror of their history.

In Bhabha's discussion of Morrison's work, there again surfaces those strange peculiarities of the literary that can only be described as uncanny. This is to do, once more, with what appears frightening or alien to the colonial subject in his / her familiar world. Using an example from Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, Bhabha writes that: "suddenly you find yourself with Henry James's Isabel Archer, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of 'incredulous' terror" (LC, 9). This notion of the 'incredulous terror' is particularly relevant to R.S. Thomas. Not only is it symptomatic of, as is seen in Chapter 2, what he experiences within his own, private life and personal, domestic and cultural home, but also of the vaster sense of his 'belonging' within Wales, the fact that Thomas remains unsure as to where, exactly, he belongs. As Bhabha states, the home and the world become commingled in such instances of cultural confusion, as "the recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions" (LC, 9). Thomas's home is open to invasion; just as Wales is open to invasion by the English.

The remainder of this chapter will therefore be devoted to the consideration of post-colonial representation prevalent in two of Thomas's main political collections of poetry, *What is a Welshman?* (1974) and *Welsh Airs* (1987). While chronologically these do not correspond exactly to Thomas's period in Eglwys-fach, many of the poems in the second collection were in fact written during this period, and many are direct responses to

the alienation experienced by Thomas at this time. The ultimate aim of the present discussion is to explore Thomas's more acute experiences of the uncanny – the unhomely – in terms of how, precisely, this feeling of anxiety is manifested as he embarks upon his most political period as a poet. Although Thomas remains on the fringes of Welsh culture and community, it is his very position on those fringes that is of interest, and his experience of the transitory, the hallucinatory, and the fragmentary within himself, as he attempts, as a colonised subject, to piece together 'a culture.' It is, as Bhabha asserts "The 'right' to signify from the periphery of authorized power," which manifests ultimately, "the power of tradition to be reinscribed through the conditions of contingency and contradictoriness that attend upon the lives of those who are 'in the minority'" (LC, 2). Thomas's 'tradition,' therefore, becomes one of his own making, a national identity constructed from his own unique viewpoint, and within which R.S. Thomas experiences, as Bhabha would have it, "a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction . . . an exploratory, restless movement" (LC, 1), as he comes to terms with modern Wales.

In his piece, "R.S. Thomas: The poetry of the sixties," in Internal Difference, M. Wynn Thomas considers the nineteen sixties as a period in Thomas's life which was filled with "fears that correspond to the double threat of collapse from without and within."<sup>196</sup> It is indeed, revealing, as already suggested, that Manafon becomes a predominant symbol of an idealised cultural state while Thomas is at Eglwys-fach, and points towards a threat to identity that occurred with Thomas's move from one parish to another. M. Wynn Thomas also takes account of the subsequent 'unreality' involved in this:

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<sup>196</sup> M.Wynn Thomas, Internal Difference (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992) 108.

R.S. Thomas will not, cannot, allow us or himself to contemplate the social structure of the real Manafon for too long in his poetry. If he did, the ground would be cut from underneath his feet.<sup>197</sup>

In Eglwys-fach, in fact, R.S. Thomas wasn't simply looking back at Manafon nostalgically, he was developing a cultural ideology based on rural, non-urban, spiritual values and, in Wynn Thomas's opinion, he was aware that he was doing so; he was aware that it was not towards the 'real' Wales that his ideals were geared. M. Wynn Thomas reinforces this notion when he discusses Prytherch's function, how he, too, though rooted in the 'world' of Manafon, possesses some inherent qualities of colonial resistance, and aids in developing a cultural philosophy. Wynn Thomas states that "Iago Prytherch is, for me, a most interesting temporary expedient for dealing with the centuries-old Welsh problem of how to resist the invading, appropriating, eyes of the English."<sup>198</sup> Thomas argues that Prytherch (and his 'kind') are in fact symptomatic of cultural, and not merely local, preservation, and that he "safeguards . . . the mystery of a way of life that is a synecdoche for Wales."<sup>199</sup> Considering the analysis of Prytherch that appears in Chapter 2, therefore, one would have to suggest that Prytherch changes along with Thomas's conception of Wales. If R.S. Thomas's feelings towards Iago were ambivalent in Manafon, it has to be said that these feelings acquire a new dimension when he looks back from Eglwys-fach, for suddenly, Iago *is the familiar*. Suddenly, Thomas realises that Iago and his fellow workers in the Montgomeryshire hills are representative of the ideal, and

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<sup>197</sup> Wynn Thomas, Internal Difference 111.

<sup>198</sup> Wynn Thomas, Internal Difference 112.



that Prytherch in himself constitutes a comfortable, reassuring identity. He becomes in this sense, a symbol of profound personal and cultural values; he begins to look homely.

Before going on to consider many of the negative and disorientating motifs of cultural belonging exposed by Thomas in his poetry, therefore, it is perhaps useful to place this in context by considering exactly what constitutes the ideal during this destabilising period in Thomas's poetic career. In the collection Tares (1961), the hill farmer is portrayed as possessing inherent qualities of survival, symbolic on another level of cultural preservation. In 'To the Farmer,' for example, he addresses the farmer in terms of colonial survival:

. . . you waited till the ground was cool,  
the enemy gone, and led your cattle  
To the black fields, where slowly but surely  
Green blades were brandished, the old triumph  
Of nature over the brief violence  
Of man (T, 10).

In post-colonial terms, the hill farmer is seen here in terms of the indigenous subject, who persists with his way of life, in face of adversity, winning through with his refusal to give in to colonial pressures. He waits until the "enemy" has gone, in order to reclaim his land. Similarly, the poem "The Parish" advocates a special connection between the poet and the farmer "Somewhere among / Its green aisles you had watched *like me* / The sharp tooth tearing its prey, / While a bird sung from a tall tree" (T, 15. My italics). And yet, Prytherch is not entirely immune to the materialistic benefits of colonisation. When he does succumb, the contempt for him once again rises, as is seen in the poem "Too Late":

. . . look at yourself  
Now, a servant hired to flog

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<sup>199</sup> Wynn Thomas, Internal Difference 113.

The life out of the slow soil,  
Or come obediently as a dog  
To the pound's whistle. (T, 25)

Thomas creates a division between 'freedom' chosen by living an agricultural, primitive life, and the financial 'freedom' achieved through the colonising processes of commercialisation and mechanisation. He sees the sacrifice and suffering which was evident to him in Manafon becoming part of the national struggle, and that colonisation needs to be viewed in terms of, as in the poem "To the Farmer," "the brief violence / Of man" over which the preservation of an indigenous cultural identity may triumph: "the old triumph / Of nature." (T, 10) As Thomas emphasises in his paper "Gwladgarwch," the world of the hill people cannot be separated from the national struggle: "I feel that Prytherch in his small fields, in a world of limited resources could well be a symbol of sanity and hope, a sign that small is beautiful."<sup>200</sup> Prytherch, whose rebellion seems minute, insignificant even, also has an element of salvation within him, an escapist element that stands above, and alongside the national struggle while also a symbol of resistance.

As M. Wynn Thomas goes on to discuss, it is in the collection Tares that Thomas himself loses his perception of himself as rooted in a specific location, the point at which the sense of not-being-at-home – unhomely – in Wales, enters the poetry. He writes that:

one might venture to suggest that it is the last of his volumes to be imbued with a sense of a particular place – a specific human and natural locality. After that, it could be argued that R.S. Thomas becomes a displaced person. One

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<sup>200</sup> "Gwladgarwch", published by Cymdeithas Cyfamod y Cymry Rhydd, 1989. My translation.

finds him struggling to realize his dreams, not through a particular place and time, as he was doing, however imperfectly, ambiguously and uncertainly, in the earlier Manafon poems, but *against* the temptation to trust any human place or time. In retrospect, it can be clearly seen that the poetry after *Tares* was being written somewhere along the road leading from Manafon to Abercuawg, that place which is no place that is extant, but 'somewhere evermore about to be.'<sup>201</sup>

This concept of the "evermore about to be," again becomes characteristic of the liminality that Thomas experiences in Eglwys-fach: it is, in Bhabha's terms, the realm of the beyond. What M.Wynn Thomas's assertion highlights is how Eglwys-fach was a place from which he sought escape, searching, once more, for the alternative cultural reality, coming to the realisation that: "No, this is not it" (SLPR, 129). This spiritual journey, *from Manafon to Abercuawg, certainly involved some complex questioning by Thomas of the nature of his identity. He had, initially, considered his linguistic allegiance an appropriate prerequisite of his cultural identity and found, in Eglwys-fach, that it was not possible to exert his identity in this way. But the estrangement he experienced was also of a more personal nature. Wynn Thomas states that language "seems to make no difference. R.S. Thomas is equally estranged from the speakers of both languages. He is thus far advanced on the road leading from Manafon to Abercuawg."*<sup>202</sup> As Wynn

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<sup>201</sup> Wynn Thomas, Internal Difference 115.

Thomas argues, he “simply exchanges a state of exile [the poem under consideration here is “A Welshman at St. James’s Park”] for a state of internal exile,”<sup>203</sup> becoming separate and distanced from the world of which he had hoped to be an integral part. The poem “Genealogy,” for example, draws on the Taliesinic methodology of mutation and multiple identities, and in doing so, also reveals much of Thomas’s own sense of instability, isolation, and displacement within society:

I was the stranger in the new town,  
Whose purse of tears was soon spent;  
I filled it with a solider coin

At the dark sources. I stand now  
In the hard light of the brief day  
Without roots, but with many branches. (CP, 102)

The line “Without roots, but with many branches” is an assertion symptomatic of several of Thomas’s complexities of identity. Certainly in a cultural sense, it is highly appropriate, for Thomas is indeed, without a sense of ‘rootedness’ in a specific locality. He is, however, a complex post-colonial figure, and through his transition from English-speaking, into Anglo-Welsh and thus subsequently to Welsh-speaking, a cultural enigma. What is interesting in this case is that the poem itself, in its references to Welsh tradition, and the knowledge it displays of the myth of Taliesin, is a desperate attempt to be considered as part of a tradition. This is the one thing that seems to be able to locate Thomas during his struggle with his cultural identity. But it is ultimately a ‘security’ of identity that is always challenged by his inability to equate it with his location within an actual Welsh community. What the poem must ultimately confront is the outsider’s position. Despite the fact that the speaker has been “The dweller in the long cave,” “the

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<sup>202</sup> Wynn Thomas, *Internal Difference* 121.

man / Watching later at the grim ford” and “the king / At the church keyhole,” he is also ultimately, “the stranger in the new town / Whose purse of tears was soon spent” (CP, 102). His location therefore is always outside the culture, in the beyond. The fact of Thomas’s liminal state of identity, therefore, gives his identity a form and a presence and, aptly, the metaphor suggests that those characteristics that form as a result of his displacement are regenerative and far-reaching. He is ‘without roots / but *with many branches.*’ (My italics). Without the ability to place himself in a community, or to be at ease with others, he is nevertheless able to evolve several different identities, like the mythic Taliesin. There is also perhaps a colonialist pun intended by the word ‘branches;’ suggesting also the Welshman who has gone to England, the exile/ex-pat who wishes to open his new ‘branches’ of business in the town, thus neutralising any sense of native identity he may have had – now ‘without roots’ and uniformly ‘the same’ within the wider Anglo-American world of commerce. Ultimately, therefore, Thomas must face the fact that his multiple identity also incorporates his English, colonial identity, a notion that will be developed fully later on in this chapter.

‘What is a Welshman?’ may well have been the question on Thomas’s mind after his period at Eglwys-fach. The reiteration of the question, that is, the suggestion that he no longer knows what constitutes the authenticity of the “soul of the true Welshman,” suggests a shattering of ideals, Thomas as once more having to question his motivation in moving closer to Wales, towards Welsh identity. What is a Welshman? (1974) is a collection that explores varying representations of Welshness, and also becomes a marker of the point at which Thomas enters an altogether more violent and scatological phase in his poetic exploration: his liminal identity becomes a distressing process of

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<sup>203</sup> Wynn Thomas, Internal Difference 120.

fragmentation and reconstruction. Much of the content of this volume is both graphic and tormenting, the vigorous, corporeal, wasteful vision of Wales he presents as being a measure of his own internal turmoil.

Returning to the volume's ambivalent title-question, it is also implicit that Thomas is suggesting that there is no such thing as an unified, homogenous Welsh identity, and that it is rather, much like Thomas's own identity, diffuse and fragmentary, comprised of many selves, many notions of "Welshmen." Its present-tense urgency also suggests that Wales's ability to be a *living* culture is called into question, and that, contrasted with the authenticity Thomas had sought in the ideal of "the true Wales" (A, 50), the reality of the sixties and seventies in Wales was, for Thomas, profoundly dissatisfying. Rather than experience Welshness as a living culture, Thomas seems to have viewed Wales as a place of decay, putrefaction and corruption. If he had once felt "reality dwindle, the dream begin" (CP, 10), he certainly now felt his dream dissipating into another kind of uncanny vision: the nightmare.

Bhabha testifies to the fictive propensities of the unhomely within the literary. It is often the case, as Bhabha states, that "literature conjures with historical specificity, using the medium of psychic uncertainty, aesthetic distancing, or the obscure signs of the spirit-world, the sublime and the subliminal" (LC, 12). That is, the unhomely itself demands some kind of specific expression in literature, of something 'beyond control,' a feel of something possessing some higher power. Or as Bhabha neatly puts it: "*when something is beyond control, but it is not beyond accommodation*" (LC, 12). The very experience of the 'unhomely' can be 'housed' therefore in literature, an element that perhaps enhances its complex dimension. Even as the unhomely surges into view as

hallucination or apparition, it also has some bearing on the construction of the subject's identity.

Hallucinatory, other-worldly, and 'uncanny' experiences of culture within the literary, can be felt strongly in Thomas's conceptualisation of Wales during the sixties and seventies – for Thomas, it is a place of haunting, sightings, of half-memories, of visions. It is worth considering these elements alongside observations made by the post-colonial critic David Punter, who aligns these kind of distorted images with the subject's desire for territorial identity, and how the inability to ascribe or fix identity geographically destabilises the cultural utopia. For the liminal subject, caught 'in-between' there is no way of uniting two divergent cultural experiences, but rather s/he has to experience liminality for what it is: a fluid experience in which any fixed concept of territory or identity is highly contested. David Punter describes the post-colonial subject's experience:

A dislocation of vision, the impossibility of putting back together a territory, a field of perception that has been fatally fractured. On this violent and terrifying ground, the epitome of deterritorialisation, not only does the question of vision itself become problematic, the whole situating of life and death trembles through a haze of passivity.<sup>204</sup>

Here, liminality is expressed predominantly through negation, presenting a state of cultural existence that throws existence itself into question. For Punter it is a

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<sup>204</sup> David Punter, *Postcolonial Imaginings* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2000) 96. Further references will be given parenthetically in the text (PI).

'dislocation,' 'impossibility,' 'fatally fractured,' 'a haze of passivity,' all which conclude that the liminal, or the 'unhomed,' writer loses all the stable margins of his/her world. Being unsure of his/her place in a postcolonial world, while also being caught in one of the most 'uncanny' moments of all of not knowing where (cultural) life ends and death begins, the subject remains exactly that: subjected.

As discussed in Chapter 1, R.S. Thomas is often seen to be prey to a certain 'passivity.' From birth, he is that subject which things 'happen to,' finding terror in his subjected 'unreal' life. In his political poetry, this feeling of passivity intensifies, and as his 'passivity' becomes translated to a cultural context the notion of having been 'born into' Wales, and yet deprived of its cultural reality made Thomas extremely wary of his inability to control his own identity. The first poem in What is a Welshman?, "He lives here", is a poem that interweaves parts of Thomas's own history with that of the history of the collier, an alternative, and widely-held notion of the identity of a typical Welshman, Thomas seems to be caught in a nightmarish vision of his own 'accidental' place in society. Bearing in mind his own distaste for the elements of the working-class, socialist, industrial society of south Wales, it is perhaps significant that he chooses this as the opening statement of his collection, for it intensifies his disgust not only with such politicised Welsh identity but also with the sense of randomness of his own.

The poem envisions a kind of nightmare of rebirth, in which Thomas as subject is 'reborn' into a society that is both familiar and yet terrifyingly unfamiliar:

and I lay on the bleak hills.  
black with the dust of coal  
not yet mined and they stood round  
with white faces  
and the old familiar slang  
of the valleys was on the lips



of the wind  
welcome boi bach  
fallen among the slag and clinkers (WW? 1).

This extract has all the making of the nightmare in which one is submissively subjectified, startlingly passive. The subject is “fallen among the slag and clinkers” as if in some sordid accident, and lies there helplessly, gazed upon by the congregation. The reference to the ‘bleak hills’ might initially connote the Manafon scenery, but these hills are “black with the dust of coal / not yet mined,” and the seemingly familiar terrain of agrarian life is savagely usurped by another, more threatening cultural image, that of the mining industry. Another play on the binary of familiar/unfamiliar is the notion of the “old familiar slang / of the valleys.” It is precisely the fact that such dialect is *not* familiar to Thomas – however familiar it might be in media constructions of Wales – that makes this image so frightening, while he himself is distanced from it, with his own ‘archaic’ linguistic identity: “with a language / filched from the dictionary / of the tribes” (WW? 1).

The very fact that the slang is heard “on the lips of the wind” delineates a kind of naturalisation and inevitability of the language, and is again destabilising, suggesting once more an overall, higher, ‘unseen’ power. It is a haunting passage also in the sense that it is haunted by other poems by Thomas, and it again brings one back to the identity expressed in the poem “The Minister.” Morgan’s dissolving identity in Thomas’s dramatic poem is expressed by the Narrator: “‘Beloved, let us love one another,’ the words are blown / To pieces by the unchristened wind” (CP, 42). The narration concludes with the assertion that: “We will listen instead to the wind’s text” (CP, 55) as the identity of Morgan dissolves in face of the elements.

Another nightmare vision follows in the poem “He lies down to be counted.” There is irony here in the fact that in Wales, people gain significance perversely through their death, rather than during their lives, and that it is in the ‘fixed’ representations of colonial history that people in Wales often view themselves. “In our country you make your way / from monument to monument,” (WW? 6) the poet asserts bitterly. The poem revolves around intimations of morbidity and decay, as Thomas envisages the notion of collective ‘memory’ being manipulated by colonialism. Thomas addresses the uncanny object of the historical monument:

And in Tregaron Henry Richard  
still freezes, cast in shame to preside  
over the pacifism of a servile people.

Thomas Charles, too, has seen the Bible  
petrified. Nothing can stir the pages  
of the book he holds; not even the draught from Tryweryn (WW? 6).

In these two short stanzas, it is possible to see once more a kind of dualistic sensibility coming into play, which on one hand establishes certain ‘knowledge’ of tradition and history, but is pre-emptive with regard to its cultural ‘worth.’ Despite the fact that the names ‘Henry Richard’ and ‘Thomas Charles’ have acquired meaning on a cultural level, they are shown now to be powerless in aiding the development of an authentic cultural identity, for they appear to Thomas to be present only as colonial compromises. It is too late in the day, Thomas seems to be saying, to make any significant impact on Wales’s developing identity through mere monuments. Henry Richard is “cast in shame” merely to “preside” passively over a “servile people” while Thomas’s Charles’s Bible has been “petrified,” in more than one meaning, both literally turned to stone, becoming part of nature, while it has also been terrified into submission by colonial power.

While both Thomas Charles and Henry Richard are representative, to a certain degree, of *living* culture, and testify to actual, real historical periods, the very fact that they are encased as ‘monuments,’ out of place and redundant, calls the whole authenticity and the notion of living culture into question. As David Punter points out:

the rhetoric of the imperial is always simultaneously a rhetoric of haunting, the installation of the names of the dead (the ‘tabernacle’) as a propitiation against an understanding of the names of the living.” (PI, 46)

Punter’s assertion also brings to light the colonial dimension of monuments, for it is evident, conversely, that such monuments are raised to give a licensed sense of national pride. These are figures the colonial power “permits” as representations of Welsh identity. Both are ultimately ‘safe’ figures, not revolutionaries. Henry Richard was “An Apostle of Peace,” an MP at Westminster, and therefore within the acceptable colonial structures, while Thomas Charles himself was more concerned with spiritual values than political/national ones. Ultimately, it is perhaps problematic as to how either one would have responded to an urgent, pressing national issue such as Tryweryn; certainly the Welsh generations that follow, and among whom their monuments stand, do not stir. Monuments are erected in order to give people a sense of their own significance and importance. What the building, monument, or landmark masks, however, is the vacant element of the future, the rupture of the continuing line of culture, and the way in which monuments ultimately endorse the values of the military status quo.

In this light, the erection of monuments to “those others / who gave their lives for the freedom / to make money, the innumerable Joneses / and Owens” (WW? 6) is equally

vacuous and futile. The loss of such Welshmen, fighting for 'Britain' in war, is not only a loss to them and their families, but a pointless loss to Wales, as Thomas also asserts in a later poem "The Parlour:" "Between you / and our kitchen the front room / with our framed casualties / in your fool wars." (WA, 40) Thomas ponders what difference these Welsh 'heroes' might have made, had they not been conditioned to fight for their 'own' country in the displaced context of Britain. These are men "who might have brought our blood / to the boil" (WW? 6). Those who 'lay down to be counted' ultimately become casualty statistics, not cultural heroes.

One of the few poems in this collection that offers a counter-ideology is the poem: "The earth does its best for him." This poem can be viewed as a reaction against such staid, colonial intimations of culture. Culture here is not expressed in monuments and statues, but through lived cultural, natural life. Thomas renounces "the precipitation / of culture from dead skies" (WW? 10) to find that his cultural ideal is to be found in nature. "Through the car's / open window," he feels the "live" earth suddenly awakening in him his own cultural possibilities. He creates a dichotomy between live earth and the "dead skies" of artificial paintings, the earth being "the seasonally / renewed offering" (WW? 10) that culture and history are unable to give. In Thomas's opinion, culture needs to be alive in the way that the earth is alive, and needs to be regenerative rather than regressive. In stark contrast to such natural surroundings, he places the act of looking at paintings in a museum. There is fear here that culture is something contained and inanimate, decayed in a "smell of dust." Also implicit is the fear of a collective cultural death: "The paintings are under glass, / or in dry rooms it is difficult / to breathe in" (WW? 10). To read the poem in another way, such suffocation and constriction seem to be symptomatic of

Thomas's own cultural experiences – he is, in a sense, always staring in at something that he cannot fully actualise, and bring to life. One also gets the impression here of Thomas lost in a 'mass' existence rather than possessing any real individuality. These paintings are:

. . . tired  
of returning the hard stare  
of eyes. The sculptures are smooth  
from familiarity. (WW?10)

The 'nation' here is overworked as a cultural construct, and becomes in danger of being merely a picturesque, artificial, and subsequently non-cultural, vision, a vision that can be marketed to tourists. What subsequently brings R.S. Thomas's individuality to the forefront in this poem is Thomas's realisation that he can rely on himself, his own senses, that he can experience culture in an individualistic way. This is a poem therefore in which he is able to relocate and re-home himself, battling against those 'unhomely' forces at work around him and within him. In the second stanza, Thomas goes on to talk of his "return to Lleyn" in cultural, naturalistic terms. This particular place becomes a "repository of the condensation / of time." That is, this is a location that has transcended time, that has an organic and thus dynamic and fertile relationship with the past, in contrast with the arid detritus of the pictures, displaced from life. Thomas here sees the earth itself as being indicative of a way of life, a hopeful symbol of all-encompassing regenerative culture.

Thomas's poem "He agrees with Henry Ford," however, goes on to delineate an unnerving distance from constructed cultural identity, this time as names become historical signifiers:

Llywelyn? Old hat.  
Glyndwr? A con man,  
Iolo licking his arse

For a doublet, for his next  
meal.

Rusty their armour,  
yellow their bones, let them  
brag in the safety of the dry  
libraries. Honours forbid  
that they should start their nonsense. (WW?11)

The word 'nonsense' at the end of this extract is perhaps more significant than it first appears. Certainly the word alludes in one sense to the very situation played out here – the pantomime-esque portrayal of Welsh heroes as 'Old hat' and 'con man' – but it also raises the question of non-sense as an imperative part of colonial discourse and the cultural condition. Colonial non-sense, as it is defined by Bhabha, is a point at which the margins of the human and the inanimate become confused, and which "is the recognition of an anxious contradictory place between the human and not-human, between sense and non-sense" (LC, 125). It is also to play with the notion of linear time and history, much in the child-like sense of appropriating things of vast importance or complexity to a single, identifiable, simplistic dimension, to make fact appear like fiction. This reductive strategy once more highlights the notion carried throughout the volume: that behind the grandeur and glory of all historical and cultural events there is a kind of gaping void, a kind of unreal 'fiction' which is constantly being mistaken for cultural fact and reality. And it can only be realised, it would seem, in a kind of riddling nonsense, the world in which the subject has "drawn the curtains / on the raw sky where our history bleeds" while "Cilgwri's ousel / on my ramshackle aerial / keeps the past's goal / against the balls of tomorrow" (WW? 11). Bhabha states that this becomes a useful strategy in order effectively to undo the masking effect of colonialism, to make the collective acutely aware of the disparity between its past and present. In short, it is to ascribe a certain

degree of unnaturalness in the present colonial climate, again, a kind of inbetweenness or liminality which neither rests comfortably as one thing nor the other. The question raised by Bhabha is “What becomes of cultural identity, the ability to put the right word in the right place at the right time, when it crosses the colonial non-sense?” (LC, 125). For Thomas, again, in a position of liminality, such tactics become a means of making identity something to be ridiculed, and thus mutable, open to change. Colonial non-sense suggests that he is still playing games with his own identity, unwilling to let it rest within a single definition.

The rest of the volume is testimonial to the continuation of Thomas’s internal “scurmious thoughts.” And yet it is not always manifested in terms of a vision or hallucination in which Thomas is helpless. In many ways, Thomas can be said to, paradoxically, adopt the guise of the coloniser, using his liminal position to explore also his own links with the colonising culture, and also as a means of establishing a certain distance from, and knowledge concerning, the ‘other’ he depicts – the Welshman. This enables Thomas to assert power, and he implies that a “Welsh” society in the form of the pro-Socialist, British-identified, non-Welsh-speaking, is somehow culturally inauthentic, far removed from his own rural, spiritually-enlightened ideal of the simple life of *y werin*. It is in contrast to this very ideal that all other cultural identities thus begin to appear grotesque and disproportionate, introducing, in short, the notion of the cultural stereotype.

The very notion of a stereotype is a very relevant concept within the discourse of colonialism. The stereotype is an impression *created* through varying types of knowledge, and in this case, knowledge based on Thomas’s own perception of Welsh

culture. It is worth also, in considering the stereotype, to keep firmly in mind the notion of the ideal against which it is posited, that is, the rural, authentic, colonially-resistant life that is now, for Thomas, represented by Iago Prytherch and his kind, the necessity to “Stay green . . . / Live large . . . and dream small” (T, 35) that becomes for Thomas a kind of nationalist slogan. In What is a Welshman? any sense of cultural reality that deviates from this is met with distaste. The volume is packed with images that perpetuate certain cultural clichés in relation to this kind of urban, colonised society. One thinks immediately of “Women / with white hair and strawberry / faces,” the “wobbling sopranos,” the tourist who cries “Anything to sell? . . . to the native rummaging among / the remnants of his self-respect” (WW? 2), “the perspiring ranks / of ageing respectables,” “police, tradesmen, councillors, / rigid with imagined / loyalty” (WW? 5), “the harp, the goddess / with gold ribs” (WW? 7) and, in the last, bitter diatribe, “It hurts him to think,” the long impersonal list of contributors to the colonial situation: “The English,” “The Welsh,” “The heiresses,” “The velvet businessmen,” “The peasantry,” “The industrialists” (WW? 12), as though cultural diversity can be contained by such restrictive and simplistic distinctions. That is not to say, of course, that Thomas sees things simplistically, merely that in the often nebulous mass of ‘culture’, it is necessary to *find certain markers of identity against which to define oneself more clearly*. These characters are part of the Welsh, and yet British-identified “public” (WA, 28), the exact same “public” from which he so vigorously distances himself in “A Welshman in St. James’s Park.” And as part of the distant, impersonal “public” their images can be used in order to demonstrate Thomas’s knowledge of such ‘fixed’ identities. In another sense, Thomas is also in danger of taking on the role of the coloniser, for the employment of



such stereotypes is one of the means by which the coloniser enacts power, through affirming supposed but inadequate 'knowledge' of one's subjects. As the subjects become stereotyped in this way, Thomas himself becomes the oppressive force attempting to eradicate the notion of 'difference': the colonised condemned to be constructed on the coloniser's terms.

Such notions of stereotyping are given prominence in Homi K. Bhabha's Location of Culture, as a discursive strategy through which the coloniser attempts to fix and inscribe set images of the colonial subject. He asserts that:

As a form of splitting and multiple belief, the stereotype requires, for its successful signification, a continual and repetitive chain of other stereotypes. The process by which the metaphoric 'masking' is inscribed on a lack which must then be concealed gives the stereotype both its fixity and its phantasmic quality – the *same old* stories of the Negro's animality, the Coolie's inscrutability or the stupidity of the Irish *must* be told (compulsively) again and afresh, and are differently gratifying and terrifying each time (LC, 77).

The need for such representation derives from the coloniser's dependency on his own knowledge as a means of fixing cultural representation and cementing his own identity in the process, the repetition of that knowledge being crucial in understanding and evaluating cultural difference. What emerges here also is the coloniser's incessant need to be both 'gratified and terrified' by the colonial subject, in order to maintain his distance and difference.

In one sense, in What is a Welshman? Thomas is incarcerated by stereotypes, and his very recognition of them distances him further from the ideal. Again, the most grotesquely overblown stereotype is the collier, and it is worth revisiting Thomas's fear of this 'inauthentic' figure in "He lives here," in light of how the collier subverts Thomas's nationalist identity, turning his cultural reality upside-down:

and a pulpit grew up under my feet  
 and I climbed into it and  
 it was the cage  
 of the mine-shaft down down down  
 to preach to the lost souls (WW? 1).

In colonialist discourse, the stereotype is viewed as a means of reassurance and knowledge, but since the projection of such images is ultimately flawed, the stereotype also threatens to disrupt and falsify the self, as the horrendous and yet tragi-comic vision here proves. Thomas's vocation as a priest is nightmarishly transformed; his nationalist vision becoming once more distorted as he realises that he is no longer elevated within his pulpit but vertiginously incarcerated within the mine shaft, where ultimately his 'preaching' is stifled, his identity redundant. It is also, manifestly, a cruel inversion of the image of the ground rising up beneath St. David in order for him to be seen and heard by the people. Thomas, in this nightmarish, uncanny vision, is once again travelling in the opposite direction, forced underground, hidden from view, enslaved rather than liberated.

Such a vision is in accordance with Bhabha's belief that the stereotype "is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place,' already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated" (LC, 66). For the self to be secure it must continually have knowledge of its 'other', and yet it is the other that ultimately threatens the self. The image of Thomas travelling down the mineshaft thus

becomes an extremely apt image of how he has, in a sense, become buried by his own stereotypes.

The stereotype, then, is simultaneously a means of comfort and fear – it is at once a daemonic ‘other’ but one that must endlessly be played out, in order to secure cultural identity on both sides. It is however a power continually in flux. No matter how well the coloniser claims to ‘know’ the subject, he must also allow for the limitations of this knowledge that will ultimately challenge his/her own identity. It may be useful also to view this in terms of Fanon’s Manichean allegory – a dualistic sensibility in which the polarities of coloniser and colonised are viewed in terms of good and evil, while terror and alienation can occur on both sides. If we consider the collier to be at the extreme pole from what Thomas considers himself to be, it is possible to view Thomas’s disgust towards this lifestyle as possessing certain characteristics of the coloniser, his ‘knowledge’ of the collier, subsequently, becoming his means of asserting power over the colonial subject. With regard to Thomas’s depiction of the industrial society, and its subjects, it is possible to see a specific agenda. Attempting a sense of concrete identity, he is showing the onlooker clearly what, as a Welshman, *he is not*, so that his identity may be defined through negation. It is also, undoubtedly, a marker of his anxiety concerning his own identity, of his own insecure belief in *his* notion of ‘a Welshman’ as opposed to the more familiar stereotypes and constructions.

Thomas’s stereotypical portrayal of the collier is interesting, for he is plagued simultaneously by the “abandonment / of the national for the class struggle” (WW? 1) that characterises the collier. Again, it is possible to contrast the poet’s perception of the collier with his perception of the hill people, towards whom, in the poem “Drowning,”

for instance, he feels admiration as they “go down, unremembered but uncomplaining” (CP, 464). The collier’s political resistance, *his* struggle for survival, is seen negatively, for it is not primarily concerned with Welsh culture or preserving an indigenous Welsh identity, but rather with social and economic conditions of workers, everywhere, an international resistance towards injustice rather than a more specific, national concern. It becomes a threat, for again it disrupts Thomas’s own personal vision of distinctive cultural survival.

Thomas’s reinforcement of certain stereotypes in What is a Welshman? may also have had another, external motivation. As has been suggested by M. Wynn Thomas, this collection may have been a conscious response to a critique of his work that had appeared in a special R.S. Thomas number of *Poetry Wales*, two years previous. Concentrating specifically on R.S. Thomas’s conception of Wales, Dafydd Elis Thomas set forth a probing argument, voicing the concern that the literary work of R.S. Thomas (and in the same breath, Saunders Lewis) harboured an élitist, middle-class ideology that failed to account for the political realities of Wales. Such an exclusive position, he argued, refused to consider certain political factions, i.e. the pro-Socialist, British-identifying, as being in any way representative of the ‘true’ people of Wales. Dafydd Elis Thomas was strongly in opposition to this perceived attitude, and to what he perceived as the “despair-laden view of Wales generated by a historically-motivated nationalism”<sup>205</sup> presented in the work of R.S. Thomas. In the view of Elis Thomas, then very much on the left-wing of Plaid Cymru, R.S. Thomas could also be seen to perpetuate the middle-class exclusivity

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<sup>205</sup> Dafydd Elis Thomas, “The Image of Wales in R.S. Thomas’s Poetry,” *Poetry Wales: An R.S. Thomas Special Issue*, Vol. 7 no. 4 (Spring 1972): 66.

which many in Plaid Cymru were, at that time, attempting to abolish. Elis Thomas accuses both Saunders Lewis and R.S. Thomas of sharing:

the basic point of view, the historically inspired nationalism which refuses to recognize the existence of present-day urban, industrial Wales. It is from this that the contempt for the present day population, particularly the working class population, which is seen throughout Saunders Lewis's work (he never portrays a working-class character in any of his plays) and in R.S. Thomas's poetry, springs.<sup>206</sup>

Elis Thomas argues that R.S. Thomas, like Saunders Lewis before him, in striving for Welsh national unity, instead divides and separates the nation into two separate groups, endorsing the rural, Welsh-speaking communities as the 'real' Wales, while de-valuing the Welsh identity of the urban, industrialised, working-class communities of the south. The paper is revealing, not only of a certain moment in the evolution of Plaid Cymru, but of the way in which, as the party sought votes in the South Wales valleys, Dafydd Elis Thomas takes R.S. Thomas's idealistic vision of 'the true Wales of my imagination' (the phrase was originally used in 1972, in "Y Llwybrau Gynt") and imposes it on the political and economic realities of contemporary Wales. Moreover, Dafydd Elis Thomas's argument is uncannily silent on the subject of the linguistic situation within these industrialised areas. M. Wynn Thomas suggests that:

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<sup>206</sup> Elis Thomas 63.

The sour venom with which the poet repeated some of his bleak images of Wales in this collection may, therefore, have been in part an answer to what he probably saw as his cocky young critic's callow optimism. (MS, 71)

The 'sour venom' Wynn Thomas refers to here can be seen clearly in many of the uncharacteristic registers used by Thomas during the course of the volume. There is, of course, the reference to vomit, "whatever / I throw up now is still theirs" (WW? 12) along with others such as "licking his arse for a doublet" (WW? 11), "choking over / the joke's phlegm" (WW? 2) and "the town with its mean streets and / pavements filthy with / dog shit" (WW? 5). The violence done to Thomas's language can be seen as a reflection of the linguistically violent impact of colonialism and, as Thomas once more expressing Bhabha's "slippage . . . excess . . . difference" (LC, 86) of his cultural identity.

R.S. Thomas's tactic during the course of the volume is to move from the nightmare into the reality, so that 'Wales' as construct is not as abstract as it appears in the first poem, but an actuality, with a corporeal dimension. Its corporeality, its 'realness' somehow makes the violent assertion *frightening*, the coloniser and the colonial subject caught now in the throes of an extremely explicit death. In the poem "It hurts him to think," he sees colonisation once more as being the perversion of a national order: "The / industrialists came, burrowing / in the corpse of a nation / for its congealed blood" (WW? 12). Here, the nation itself is seen as a 'corpse' waiting to be disposed of, while Thomas also views the effect of colonisation on himself in shockingly physical terms. "Whatever / I throw up now," he laments, "is still theirs." Here again he breaks with his usual

meticulous diction in the linguistically violent and wholly uncharacteristic vision of language as vomit, being thrown up in bitterness.

What Thomas manifests here is the complete breakdown of his cultural ideal, and of himself as a subject, roaming among the ruins of culture. In asking What is a Welshman? there is also the bitter suggestion that he himself *is not one*, and that the power of what he sees as dead and corrupt, as a ruinous version of Wales, is potentially overwhelming, and, in many ways, more powerful than his idealistic vision. Failure and ruin are at the heart of his experience of nationhood. David Punter suggests that,

There is the sense of ruin at the origin that attends these aftermaths of empire, the awareness that what was destroyed can never be reconstructed. And there is the sense of the hovering of chaos around these sites of depredation, the uncertainty about what, if anything, will be 'met' (PI, 55).

Thomas's acute awareness of colonisation, and himself as being both prey to, and perhaps complicit in its forces, thus destabilises and ruptures his sense of identity. His own personal sense of himself as Welshman, along with the vaster question of what constitutes Welshness, become profoundly interconnected, and Thomas cannot distinguish between the two: Wales's ruin is his ruin.

Welsh Airs, published in 1987, is a collection of poetry, including some previously unpublished poems, that spans two decades of Thomas's career. 'Airs' conjures up several images that suggest, unsurprisingly perhaps, the notion of an unstable identity. 'Airs' alludes strongly to the stereotype – the inoffensive, curtailed vision of

Welsh identity that is both picturesque and pleasing. To have ‘Welsh airs and graces’ is somehow to conform to the coloniser’s viewpoint; it is to provide the pleasing, non-threatening image the coloniser desires. It might, relatedly, suggest “airs” in the sense of inoffensive Welsh tunes, on the lines of many ‘Cymric’ anthologies in the nineteenth century. There might also be a play on Welsh ‘heirs,’ in which case we have a suggestion of the disruption of continuity, genuine survival of traditions, and its replacement by this rather vacuous notion of affectation and imitation. And yet in no way can Thomas be considered as wholly separate from this – has he not himself adopted certain ‘airs’ since learning Welsh, since yearning to return to the ‘true’ Wales? These concepts are all highly suggestive of the world of the post-colonial, the reconfiguration of identity, camouflage, multiple meanings and selves, and the deconstruction of cultural motifs.

The reader experiences disorientation, as it becomes evident that Thomas is caught, once again, in a position of liminality. Nightmare visions, half-memories, and fragmented histories continue. In the embittered “Alma Mater” for example, his birth and upbringing is recalled through broken memories, a commingling of ‘culture’ and ‘family.’ Given Thomas’s birth in Cardiff, the poem seems yet another attempt at exploring this ‘point of origin,’ giving it a dimension and significance in the present. His disgust for industrialisation and commerce and the suffocation of Cardiff here becomes confused with his difficult relationship with his mother, and, subsequently, his complex relationship with the notion of past and of upbringing. He portrays what he perceives to be Cardiff’s ‘unnatural’ culture, and its deathly propensities; it is “the nation’s / museum the burial ground / of its speech a gallery of bought faces” (WA, 36). The reference to the “bought faces” presumably alludes to the portraits in the National Museum’s galleries,



but also perhaps implies prostitution, a suggestion wholly in keeping with the tone of the poem. Here is the kaleidoscopic metropolitan world of the capital, a capital with no definite national identity, and yet its attributes - Cardiff Arms Park, pubs, National Museum, punters and prostitutes - acquire an essentially worldly, materialistic dimension, a world which seems eerily alien to Thomas, and yet this is his birthplace, not his 'home.' Again, the poet is unhomed. For Thomas, Cardiff

is a stone  
doorstep I played  
on a while in a brief  
ignorance of where I belonged. (WA, 36)

This cold, mechanised world of Cardiff is also perversely his place of origin, of personal identity, and of innocent childhood. There is a Lacanian element to this, the "brief / ignorance" reminiscent of the child's existence before the mirror stage when it sees itself as part of a whole of consciousness, not separate in any way from any other thing, but an integral part of an organic whole. The mirror stage, in which the child recognises itself as separate entity challenges that sense of the unity of one's world, and it is the point at which imperfection becomes a possibility for the individual. Lacan deems the mirror stage as the point at which the child realises itself as an 'I', as an idealised, superior identity. What the child sees in the mirror, creates the image of the "I" as an illusion of control and perfection. It also, however, raises certain questions of how 'valid' or 'real' the self is, as it is reflected in the mirror. According to Lacan:

The *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that

extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality . . . and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity.<sup>207</sup>

As Lacan suggests here, the mirror stage enables the self to come into view, presenting for the subject “a form of its totality,” but also introducing the idea that one is somehow alien to oneself: that the reflection, in itself, manifests a kind of inherent alienating quality in the subject, suggesting that one is somehow ‘incomplete’ and possessing a strange identity that one perhaps does not wish to possess. This ultimately creates a permanent sense of being imperfect, but striving endlessly for perfection.

Thomas also sees himself as an imperfection of his mother’s body, for Cardiff is also that place “where a girl / relieved herself of me” (WA, 36). Here is again a bleak, detached vision, with rather scatological connotations. She is “relieving herself” as if defecating, and *he* is what is defecated: he is waste. There is a powerful sense of self-division apparent here, and a painful reminder of his strange, suffocating relationship with his mother, himself feeling responsible and guilty for being born into the world, of being the imperfection blighting his mother’s, and his own, world.

Increasingly in Welsh Airs Thomas feels ‘imperfect,’ and incomplete, gradually losing his grasp on what constitutes his “true” identity, becoming drawn obsessively into the realm of the hallucinatory and the ephemeral. In the poem “Welsh,” for example, the poet addresses this very sense of ‘authentic’ culture being inaccessible to him, and this acquiring a kind of phantomic, hallucinatory quality:

All those good words;  
And I outside them,

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<sup>207</sup> Jacques Lacan, Écrits: a selection (London: Routledge, 1989) 5.

Picking up alms  
 From blonde strangers.  
 I don't like their talk,  
 Their split vowels;  
 Names that are ghosts  
 From a green era. (WA, 19)

It is possible to see how the notion of cultural authenticity, and of 'belonging', has been displaced here by a sense of alienation. Thomas is 'outside' the experience, and the language is distant and foreign to him, "ghosts / From a green era." Again, here, Thomas *is* the outsider, and is intensely aware of his own inability to enter the community, and thus the community continues to appear unreal and ghostly. The same anxiety can be seen in "Welcome," when Thomas adopts the voice of the native addressing the colonising English: "You can walk this country / From end to end; / But you won't be inside" (WA, 21). Here, the native engages the position of power, for the native has the ability to understand the coloniser's language, while the colonising English, in contrast (and this is occasionally how Thomas sees himself), are unable truly to 'access' the culture of Wales. Similarly, in "The Parlour", the visitor is one who "knock[s] with the wrong tongue" and as a result, is destined to be treated with cool reserve: "we hand you / the iced cake of translation. / It is not what we mean" (WA, 40). One is reminded also of the quotation that appears as an epigraph to this chapter, the belief that one does not get 'beyond' the Welsh parlour without the language, and is thus not able to fully enter the 'home' of the Welsh speaker.

While the above poems undoubtedly refer to a notion of division and exclusion, of being 'denied' a sense of belonging, there is also the implication that one is outside precisely because one's identity is in some way incomplete and unfulfilled. The poem "Dic Aberdaron," for example, can be considered as manifesting a sense of Thomas's

outsider-ness; even as the rural life is registered, now we note that it is associated not with the community of the *hafod*, but with the figure of the isolate. The poem itself had been preceded by T.H. Parry Williams's poem of the same name, collected in Parry-Williams's collection "Ugain o Gerddi" in 1949. Thomas was undoubtedly aware of this original poem, as Jason Walford Davies has noted,<sup>208</sup> while also suggesting that Thomas's portrayal of this "pen-ffwlcyn yr holl frawdoliaeth"<sup>209</sup> ("arch-simpleton of mankind"<sup>210</sup>) is an attempt, effectively, to 'save' Dic Aberdaron becoming a subject of ridicule. For Thomas he is rather a heroic figure, one that becomes emblematic of the intellectual possibilities of Prytherch and his kind. Through this poem, therefore, one becomes aware of Thomas subtly appropriating a Welsh-language poem in order to express his own cultural identity. Dic Aberdaron may be, for the Welsh-speaking Parry-Williams, a figure who may be taken lightly, but for the Thomas who feels himself to be outside this Welsh-language tradition, he is, in fact, symbolic of something much greater. Thomas's own aspiration to live the simple, rural, Welsh and *learned* life is attached to the figure of Dic Aberdaron.

R.S. Thomas's poem is also inspired visually by a watercolour painting of this *half-legendary folk-hero*,<sup>211</sup> a vision that also becomes symbolic of the superiority of the simple, rural life. Thomas is full of wonder and mystery as he gazes at this picture, trying to understand both the figure within and the period in which he lived, stating

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<sup>208</sup> See *Gororau'r Iaith* 32-34.

<sup>209</sup> T.H. Parry Williams, *Ugain o Gerddi* (Aberystwyth: Gwasg Aberystwyth, 1949) 24.

<sup>210</sup> *Ugain o Gerddi*. My own translation.

<sup>211</sup> It once hung over R.S. Thomas's desk; it is now stored in the R.S. Thomas Research Centre, University of Wales, Bangor.

paradoxically that “Telling us so much / it so much the more / withholds” (WA, 46). Significantly therefore, again, Thomas as onlooker is denied full comprehension of the painting, and there is a certain frustration here, as Thomas the outsider is unable to fully understand his subject. What is most significant once more, is the notion that this “Radiant soul” has no place in Thomas’s present. The poet is anxious as he awaits the subject’s arrival:

he hastens towards  
us, to the future  
we inhabit and must

welcome him to, but  
nervously, all too  
aware of the discrepancy  
with his expectations. (WA, 46)

Is there not also a hint here of Thomas’s own insecurity? Anxiety that he is not the present-day counterpart of Dic Aberdaron, lacking his imaginative energy, desperate to be in possession of a “mind charging itself / at its own sources.” There is also a sense of melancholic loss to be felt, the loss of the primitive source from which Dic Aberdaron himself stems, a scholar and yet one without pretension:

. . . a labourer’s

clothes: coarse trousers, torn  
jacket, a mole-skin  
cap. But that volume  
under the arm (WA, 46).

It is that very “but,” the suggestion of covert knowledge, that places Dic Aberdaron on a pedestal. Thomas also experiences a bizarre sense of recognition on another level, as one is reminded of a similar depiction of Prytherch in ‘A Labourer’: “The same garments, frayed with light / Or seamed with rain, cling to the wind-scoured bones” (CP, 39). The

doubling of Prytherch and Dic Aberdaron is another unsettling experience for Thomas, for he recognises in both a kind of primitive understanding and learning that he feels lacking in himself. Both become empowered, while Thomas is left grappling once more with a sense of guilt, of inadequacy, born of insecurity.

But if Thomas's displacement is addressed and confronted in these poems with a kind of haunting sense of loss, it is elsewhere expressed with a venom and belligerence that leaves the reader feeling decidedly uneasy. One of the main objectives of the aggression in the poetry is that Thomas is eager to make the readers aware, and also his 'native people,' that their own actions carry cultural and political repercussions. Ngugi Wa' Thiongo has noted the same kind of bitterness as being present in much postcolonial writing in Africa, when the writer becomes frustrated at his/her powerlessness as an individual and begins to look internally, within the mass of the nation, to find the cause of the problem. In his study of post-colonial African culture, Moving The Centre, he raises the question of the writer's role. Ngugi writes that:

Sometimes the writer blamed the people – the recipients of the crimes – as well as the perpetrators of the crimes against the people. At times the moral horror was touched in terms perilously close to blaming it all on the biological character of the people. Thus although the literature produced was incisive in its observation, it was nevertheless characterised by a sense of despair. The writer

in this period often retreated into individualism, cynicism,  
or into empty moral appeals for a change of heart.<sup>212</sup>

As the writer in a colonised culture becomes strained in his efforts to revive the nation, those efforts often result in turning personal cultural anxieties and insecurities outwards towards the people. This “moral horror” experienced by the writer is no doubt because of the writer’s failure to align his/her own ideals of cultural rebellion with the acceptance of colonisation by his people. Welsh Airs is continually addressing this fault, as Thomas describes the people in an accumulative series of negations. These are people “bred on legends,” with an “ineptitude for life” (WA, 9), “a people to whom provincialism / is a reasonable asking-price / for survival” (WA, 37), “a people who were not worthy of it,” who “talk of a time they thought they were alive” (WA, 49), and “a slow people / with drained hearts, offering / a welcome to those who can pay” (WA, 39). For postcolonial writers, seeing the people for whom they write, and whom they hope to reach, succumb to colonisation seemingly without resistance devalues the writer’s own insistence on continuation and survival. This is *why* therefore, in one sense, Thomas is compelled to draw attention to, and recognise, these faults, in order, once more, to confirm his own dedication, to assert his own identity through difference.

However, it may be that it is no longer a question of considering Wales only from the point of view of the clear-cut dichotomy of coloniser / colonised, but also within the framework of an altogether different cultural phenomenon – the neo-colonial. The neo-colonial, which arguably can be more damaging to a nation than colonialism itself, entails putting power in the hands of a native bourgeoisie, so that they may impose their own set

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of (colonially-derived) values on their own people. In Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin argue that “neo-colonialism was more insidious and more difficult to detect and resist than the older overt colonialism.”<sup>213</sup> Ngugi focuses specifically in his study on the neo-colonial state, which he defines as a new cultural group that invests power in the name of the nation, only to abuse those powers in order to further colonial control. Of the neo-colonial powers, Ngugi states that:

Their mission became that of overseeing the continuity of the colonial state in a new guise . . . They are able to carry out their mission with absolute conviction because they have inherited the same world outlook, even *vis-à-vis* themselves, formerly held by the imperialist bourgeoisie . . . Under neo-colonialism, the cultural and the psychological aspects of imperialism become even more important as instruments of mental and spiritual coercion.<sup>214</sup>

The most telling aspect here is that there is no *intentional* manipulation present as there had been in colonisation itself; the force of colonisation is such that it has developed a colonial *mind set*, even among its subjects. What is characteristic of the neo-colonial nation is that it is a country which believes itself to be free of colonial domination, whilst caught in intricate colonial structures.

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<sup>212</sup> Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms (London: James Currey, 1993) 68.

<sup>213</sup> Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies (London: Routledge, 1998) 162.

<sup>214</sup> Ngugi Wa Thiongo 52.



There is evidence that R.S. Thomas was, at some level, aware of the dangers of neo-colonialism in Wales. On more than one occasion, he had expressed the fear that devolution for Wales was a dangerous thing, precisely because it transferred the colonial problem, rather than permitting the formation of any authentic, distinct, non-British identity. As the post-colonial critic John Macleod argues, “postcolonialism may wear a radical or oppositional face, but this only masks its complicity with the *continuing* oppression of people in the present.”<sup>215</sup> While devolution in Wales would seem to be a specific, exact example of neo-colonial control, Thomas’s response to the all-pervading presence of the monarchy, and towards the people’s gratitude to the monarchy for its presence within Wales, is also highly suggestive of the neo-colonial ‘moment.’ The poem ‘Loyalties,’ for example, draws attention specifically to this kind of submissiveness.

Thomas writes:

The prince walks upon the carpet  
Our hearts have unrolled  
For him; a worn carpet,  
I fear. (WA, 35)

The phrase “I fear” seems to be expressing something more than mere dissension with the whole situation; it may manifest a true and powerful fear at the situation that has been created here, a despairing remark at the people ‘lost’ to a neo-colonialist mentality. Most terrifying of all is the gratitude expressed: “Our hearts have unrolled / For him.” The question in the second stanza “where does it lead to / Anyway?” thus suggests the potentially damaging long-term effects on the nation’s consciousness. There is a darker implication, too, for in mentioning carpet’s “rents, these blood stains / This erosion of the

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<sup>215</sup> John Macleod, Beginning Postcolonialism (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) 246.

edges / Of it" (WA, 35), he also suggests the violent processes that enable neo-colonialism, the complete erosion of a way of living.

Thomas's anguished (and by now perhaps predictable) reaction is to place as adversary the simplified, rural context destroyed by such oppressive, external control. He yearns to take this carpet and "to run it to the door / Of the holding where Puw lived / Once, wrapping the language / About him" (WA, 35). Here he raises the age-old question of cultural preservation against political change, and sees the destruction of a way of authentic national life. "Loyalties" is a poignant title, for it assumes that much of the 'public' is loyal only to their monarchy, unwilling to renounce this rather artificial sense of 'belonging' for a more tenuous sense of survival, the grim, stubborn, and perhaps futile survival of Puw and his like.

How does the neo-colonial address history, however? In the neo-colonial mindset, cultural motifs seem to be reduced and simplified. In "Hyddgen," for example, cultural history is viewed as something entirely transient. The poem questions whether events such as Owain Glyndŵr's first battle has ultimately had any bearing on present day Wales or Welsh identity: "He beat the English / Does it matter now / In the rain?" Again, there is the threat of annihilation, as Thomas ponders:

History goes on;  
On the rock the lichen  
Records it: no mention  
Of them, of us. (WA, 17)

Does history have significance for the colonised nation? History should be one of the main unifying forces of any nation, the notion of a shared national/communal historical

consciousness. Thus, in order to succeed, the coloniser must rewrite or even effectively erase history. Of history in the post-colonial society Ngugi Wa' Thiongo states:

But it is precisely because history is the result of struggle and tells of change that it is perceived as a threat by all the ruling strata in all the oppressive exploitative systems. Tyrants and their tyrannical systems are terrified at the sound of the wheels of history. History is subversive. And it is because it is actually subversive of the existing tyrannical system that there have been attempts to arrest it. But how can one arrest the wheels of history? So they try to *rewrite* history, make up *official* history; if they can put cottonwool in their ears and in those of the population, maybe *they* and *the people* will not hear the *real* call of history, will not hear the *real* lesson of history.<sup>216</sup>

For the neo-colonialists, history is danger, for it can contain examples of resistance, of reactionary behaviour, and it must therefore be eroded, and replaced by another, more 'suitable' version. As Ngugi states – 'History *is* subversive because *truth* is! . . . The masses know it. So, too, do the ruling comprador bourgeoisie."<sup>217</sup>

This is primarily the issue with which the poem "Border Blues" is concerned: the erasure of history and tradition from cultural consciousness. As Jason Walford Davies has discovered, the poem manifests "the anxiety that the present has lost its perception of

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<sup>216</sup> Ngugi Wa Thiongo 96-97.

<sup>217</sup> Ngugi Wa Thiongo 100-101.

the imaginative propensities of the past – in truth, of the power of imagination altogether” (GI, 77. My own translation). In “Border Blues” we follow Thomas as he feels his way through a cultural wasteland, one towards which his attitude is ambiguous and often changing. “Border Blues” is again symptomatic of the fluctuating perspectives of the colonised subject. Walford Davies stresses that “the fear of a present without a dimension of the past – having to live ‘in an anonymous land, a land without vibrations,’ as Thomas would have it” (GI, 77. My own translation), lies beneath the surface of “Border Blues.”

It is not difficult to see the attraction of history for R.S. Thomas. History, after all, is one of the few things that *can* be constructed and re-made in order to fulfil different cultural needs. If it is possible for the coloniser to manipulate colonial history, was it not also possible for the colonised to do the same? One is reminded of Thomas’s ‘construct’ of Manafon, a history reconstructed in hindsight, that “this was the parish of Ieuan Brydydd Hir, Gwallter Mechain and Penfro, in their day three talented and famous Welshmen” (A, 51), Thomas finds a way to authenticate his past in a way which best serves his identity and sense of belonging in the present. As Gwyn Alf Williams has famously pointed out:

The Welsh as a people have lived by making and remaking themselves in generation after generation, usually against the odds, usually within a British context. Wales is an artefact which the Welsh produce. If they want to.<sup>218</sup>

Certainly Thomas can be said to be ‘making and re-making Wales’ in his poetry, in so far as he depicts a Wales that reflects his own personal experience, and of a specific history

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that he feels corresponds with the identity, indeed the artefact, he is trying to create. However, it is also true that Thomas ‘unmakes’ Wales in his poetry, and uses history in order to subvert and challenge the present world of mechanisation and Anglicisation, deconstructing Wales from the viewpoint of history in order, once more, to highlight the effects and disjunction that result from colonisation.

In his study *Postcolonial Imaginings*, David Punter describes such writing as “haunted by the secret site” of identity, that is, the suggestion of silences and absences within the post-colonial text that reveal its existence as the “text instead” rather than the original ‘authentic’ postcolonial text. As Punter writes, such texts are

a mere pale imitation of the text that might have been or the text that is to come; the text that, in this particular case, can be written only when the sea-borne blight of invasion has receded (PI, 90).

What Punter effectively suggests is that no text can be thoroughly considered outside its colonial context while colonisation is still in progress; the motivation of such writing is obviously to suggest that one reality has been replaced by another. It is the ‘text instead,’ but one that can be detected. “Border Blues” is a series of incomplete assertions that are continually interrupted, suggesting the intrusion of another force, cultural and psychological, that prevents identity, history, and the tradition, from achieving textual completion.

Throughout “Border Blues” the most explicit references to the “text instead” can be seen in Thomas’s purposeful use of Welsh quotations, followed instantly by a crass

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<sup>218</sup> Gwyn Alf Williams, *When was Wales?* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1985) 304.

reconstruction in English, highlighting the way in which Welsh experience becomes disrupted through colonisation. Such a ‘text instead’ can be seen in the following extract:

*Eryr Pengwern, penngarn llwyt heno . . .*  
 We still come in by the Welsh gate, but it’s a long way  
 To Shrewsbury now from the Welsh border. (WA, 11)

Here the text is interrupted, the English language colonising the ghostly Welsh voice, re-ordering its existence into a more suitable, colonial mould. Here is a direct quotation, once again, of ‘Canu Heledd’ (an account of which is paraphrased in Chapter 2 in reference to “Cynddylan on a Tractor”). This particular quotation refers to the sequence “Eryr Pengwern,” in which Heledd is tormented by the haunting screeches of the eagles as they feast on the corpses of the men slain in battle – i.e. Heledd’s father and brothers – her ‘own’ flesh and blood. The eagle of Pengwern, the lines reveal, becomes for Heledd a ‘dark thorn’ in the dead of night, suggesting the constant, stabbing pain inflicted on Heledd as she confronts the death of her family, and at the same time, her own aloneness in the world.<sup>219</sup> The fact that the line is left incomplete is all the more haunting, for the lines that follow in the original Welsh text are “Uchel iawn ei adlais / Eiddig am gig a gerais” “Echoing loudly / Hungry for the meat I once loved.”<sup>220</sup> This reduction of Cynddylan to ‘meat’ again points to the horrific degradation of the situation, and Heledd experiences hallucinations and visions as a result of her newly deracinated, liminal position.

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<sup>219</sup> Gwyn Thomas ed. *Yr Aelwyd Hon: Diweddariadau o hen farddoniaeth Gymraeg gan Bedwyr Lewis Jones, Derec Llwyd Morgan, Gwyn Thomas*. (Llandybie, Llyfrau'r Driw, 1970.) This is a modernisation of the original, that appears on page 94 of this text as “Eryr Pengwern, gwrychyn llwyd heno.”

<sup>220</sup> *Yr Aelwyd Hon*. My own translation.

Considering the graphic and melancholic content of Heledd's poem, the colloquial remarks that follow seem woefully inadequate. The 'text instead' is seen as one historic, legendary reality is wiped out by another, much blander statement. There is added poignancy here in the fact that the court of Pengwern would have been located in Shrewsbury, once part of Wales, and that the subsequent depiction of it being "a long way . . . from the Welsh border" (WA, 11) denotes how the margins of Wales have become smaller, how the terrain has been usurped through colonisation. It is, as David Punter remarks, "a writing 'instead of' a text that can no longer be written because it has been defaced, effaced" (PI, 81).

The 'text instead' succeeds in inter-cutting a memory rooted in history and culture with an image of domination, control and loss. It is further heightened by Thomas's description of the pantomime: "We go each Christmas to the pantomime; / It was 'The Babes' this year, all about nature." (WA, 11) The 'text instead' grotesquely juxtaposes the Welsh tragedy with a trivial and distinctively *English* form.

The same kind of 'text instead' occurs in the next stanza, in which Thomas quotes an eighteenth-century folk song, "Bugeilio'r Gwenith Gwyn," in which a young man yearns for his lover. Thomas quotes the first few lines, while letting the remainder of the stanza drift into the English-language text, marking once more how Welsh indigenous identity has been erased by Anglicisation. The speaker, the carefree young boy of the song ("Mi sydd fachgen ifanc, ffol / Yn byw yn ol fy ffansi / I am a young, foolish, boy, living by my fancy"<sup>221</sup>) is now "Riding on a tractor, / Whistling tunes / From the world's dance-halls" (WA, 12). The boy now sings a pop-song, not a Welsh song rooted in the

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<sup>221</sup> My own translation of the folk song, WA 11.

past, but a contemporary song part of a globalised media, part of the “world,” not of a rooted culture.

The text of “Bugeilio’r Gwenith Gwyn” haunts the next few lines, as Jason Walford’s study of the poet’s Welsh literary allusions Gororau’r Iaith, affirms. Walford Davies points out that Thomas, in knowing the rest of the song, has appropriated the Welsh into an English mould, distorting the picture. A literal translation of the Welsh original would be:

I rose hastily with the dawn  
To kiss the ground where her feet had been  
In the woods where I roamed (GI, 64. My own translation).

This image is wholly transformed in “Border Blues”: “Rising early / To flog the carcass / Of the brute earth” (WA, 64). The passage, in a sense, does the opposite of the first extract; it takes a light-hearted, playful scene, a rural ‘Welsh’ vision, and distorts it into a dark, menacing vision of death, avarice and necessity (the English counterpart). Once again, the ‘true’ image is lost, and all that is left is the colonial reality.

“Border Blues” plays continually with different characters within Welsh cultural history, constantly destabilising their authenticity with their English ‘versions.’ The fragmented narrative and dispersal of voices and characters become part of a colonialist narrative that shifts between several different colonial perspectives. And like T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land,” another text that ‘haunts’ the poem, it is narrated by an ambivalent voice, similar to Eliot’s Tiresias, whose vision is often divided: “I, Tiresias . . . throbbing between two lives,” silent observer of the “Unreal city.”<sup>222</sup> The narrator of “Border Blues” experiences similar divided and unreal experiences, caught between two cultures:

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<sup>222</sup> T.S. Eliot, Selected Poems (London: Faber & Faber, 1961) 59.



I was going up the road with Beuno beside me  
 Talking in Latin and old Welsh,  
 When a volley of voices struck us; I turned,  
 But Beuno had vanished, and in his place  
 There stood the ladies from the council houses:

Blue eyes and Birmingham yellow  
 Hair, and the ritual murder of vowels (WA, 10).

The sudden change here is frightening; it is once more that sudden moment of the 'uncanny' when something dear and familiar, and something which one presumes, however misguidedly, to be a marker of one's identity suddenly becomes foreign and alien, dissolving one's stability. The speaker goes on to comment that:

*Some of the old ones got sentimental,*  
 Singing Pantycelyn; but we soon drowned them;  
 It's funny, these new tunes are easy to learn (WA, 11).

The insistence on the use of a song from the tradition is perceived as being 'sentimental' here, as breaking with the norm. The concept that "these tunes are easy to learn" is a reminder once again of colonial strategy and how rhymes and tunes are used within educational regimes to sustain control of the cultural consciousness; it is the surest way to secure a colonial mindset, and to erase people's histories. It is also a more direct reminder of the popular song that has replaced "Bugeilio'r Gwenith Gwyn." And it is the simplicity and ease with which these kind of rhymes are presented and used to brainwash that is under scrutiny here. An impression on a cultural consciousness is expressed thus:

Six drops in a bottle,  
 And an old rhyme  
 Scratched on a slate  
 With stone pencil:  
 Abracadabra  
 Count three, count nine,  
 Bury it in your neighbour's field  
 At bed time (WA, 13).

This also has the feel of something that is half-remembered, perhaps incomplete, a once-lyrical and meaningful rhyme that has now become meaningless and inane. Having the blandness and the memorability of a pop song, it once again suggests a means through which colonisation has been able to erase certain aspects of cultural tradition – it is the “song instead” that ultimately devalues the sense of cultural tradition.

Such recognition of the subject’s irrelevance against the greater significance of time and nature is also manifestly a fear of death. Thomas, as he anticipates his own death, his own insignificance, views this death also in terms of culture, the focal point of much of his ‘overtly’ national poems. In this sense, it is perhaps possible to see the motivation behind the critique of those such as Dafydd Elis Thomas, who have attacked R.S.’s resolve for ignoring the present ‘living’ Wales. We see in these poems that it is the people themselves that seem now to be possessed by this aforementioned “haze of passivity,” becoming eerie automatons in Thomas’s Wales of artifice and inauthenticity. In the poem “Deprivation” he describes them almost as a kind of living dead:

Over their sour  
tea they talk of a time  
they thought they were alive (WA, 49).

The death-imagery reaches its dramatic conclusion in the poem “Welcome to Wales,” in which the narrator sardonically invites the stranger, and the visitor to

Come to Wales  
To be buried; the undertaker  
Will arrange it for you. . . .  
Why not  
Try it? We can always raise  
Some mourners, and the amens  
Are ready (WA, 34).

The ground has been 'prepared' for death, Thomas states, for Wales feels as though it is already in mourning for its lost self, while he registers his own sense of rage and frustration at being 'Welsh' alongside the collective 'we' for whom he 'speaks.' And yet this poem puts forth a relatively mild conception of the nation's death, in contrast to other poems within the collection in which death is portrayed in a horrifically graphic register reminiscent of What is a Welshman? Thomas's state of confusion can be seen plainly in the way such poems at times lurch out of control in terms of language. "Toast," is a prime example of such loss of control. Thomas asserts:

I look at Wales now forty  
years on. Was there a chance,  
as some hoped, that maggots,  
burrowing in the carcass, would grow  
wings and take themselves off,  
leaving at least the bones to acquire  
a finish? (WA, 37).

The use of such putrefying images and registers suggest profound imaginative disturbance, and again recalls the nightmare vision of unbelonging and 'unhomeliness.' There is bitterness in the fact that Wales's compliance with colonisation is the very reason he is forced to feel such disgust and shame towards Welsh identity. And yet there is also the suggestion that he himself is no different. In "A Country," Thomas ridicules his own romantic view of Wales:

He went out at night,  
Imagining the dark country  
Between the border and the coast  
Was still Wales. (WA, 22)

The 'real' Wales however, as he again suggests here, is dead, the corpse indeed of a nation that has committed suicide:

And yet under such skies the land

Had no more right to its name  
 Than a corpse had; self-given wounds  
 Wasted it. It lay like a bone  
 Thrown aside and of no use  
 For anything except shame to gnaw. (WA, 22)

The responsibility for this is turned inward towards the people and, as a result, Thomas himself becomes devoid of compassion. Indeed, the poem centres primarily on his own sense of alienation and failure for “At fifty he was still trying to deceive / Himself,” and it is perhaps significant here that the ‘Himself’ is emphasised by the run-on line. It is useful in this context to recall Saunders Lewis’s assertion in *Y Llenor* in 1941, that “Many, and among them Welshmen, ask why it [Wales] should be allowed to live,”<sup>223</sup> and it is undoubtedly this question that continues to plague Thomas. Thomas sees Wales as being entirely complicit in its own death, driven to destruction through its acceptance of colonisation, and its blindness to neo-colonial modes of thinking. For Saunders Lewis, however, the nation remains a colonised subject:

The carcass of Wales is lying here, sorely abused,  
 With not many to weep for her misfortune,  
 Her conqueror’s wretched slave-girl – yesterday found  
 To his fancy – today, a turd.<sup>224</sup>

Although the similarity between the expression and imagery used by the two is remarkable, the perspective is manifestly different. Wales, for Lewis, is ‘sorely abused,’ manipulated and degraded by colonial rule, a slave girl abused by a powerful, conquering man. Wales is forcibly manipulated by England, once in favour, and then disposed of as

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<sup>223</sup> Bruce Griffiths, *Saunders Lewis* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1989) 3.

<sup>224</sup> Saunders Lewis “The Carcass,” quoted from Alun R. Jones and Gwyn Thomas, eds. *Presenting Saunders Lewis* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1983) 181.

waste, as a base and filthy product when the delight of the feast is over. The poem goes on:

What stench moves beneath her flesh?  
Tape-worms, a host of public servants  
Battening on the death of a poor motherland.<sup>225</sup>

Lewis here is willing to consider the fact that Wales has been manipulated from the outside. Unlike Thomas, he is able to feel some compassion for its death, and the poem is substantially less bitter as a result. Lewis, however, had been a Welsh speaker all his life, and though he was an outsider in terms of his birth, and in many of his attitudes, he was also one of the colonised nation himself in battling against Anglicisation. Thomas, coming from the viewpoint of one who had been, by origin, upbringing and values, essentially *English*, could perhaps not as readily understand why the Welsh should be duped by its colonial strategies.

Again, the only hope for Thomas seems to be the pastoral, the rural ideal in which the cultural identity is preserved through its 'natural' defences:

. . . the old currents are in the grass,  
Though rust has becalmed the plough.  
Somewhere a man sharpens a scythe;  
A child watches him from the brink  
Of his own speech, and this is of more  
Importance than all the visitors keeping  
A sly saint asleep in his tomb (WA, 18).

Geography and geology become a protective force against colonialism. Caught in the liminal position, Thomas finds comfort in the fact that there are some elements that remain unchanging through the passage of time. Beyond the land's colonial signification as 'territory' Thomas reinforces the notion that "the old currents are in the grass" (WA,

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<sup>225</sup> Lewis "The Carcass" 181.

18), beyond the reach of the coloniser – and therefore nature / native character will remain unchanging. This belief in the prevalence of nature over the political abstract is explored by David Punter, when he writes of:

the need to suppose that, despite all the reterritorialisations,  
the partitions, the redrawing of boundaries for imperial  
convenience, something rocklike remains, something that  
has survived the violence and exploitation and thereby  
demonstrates the salving possibility that all can be made  
whole again, that new maps can be drawn on fresh paper,  
that the legacy of domination can be erased (PI, 34).

For Thomas, it is evidently the superiority of the rural setting, of the natural elements, that offer any hope of regeneration for the Welsh nation – echoed once more is the assertion “the way back / Is not so far as the way forward” (WA, 18). The poem “Expatriates,” for example, is critical of the act of “leaving / The hills and the high moors / For the jewelled pavements” (WA, 16) and concludes in suggesting that the rural way of life contains a kind of simple truth and unity, a preservation against the darker forces of progress and Anglicisation. He refers to the “far lakes, / Aled and Eiddwen, whose blue litmus / Alone could detect / The mind’s acid” (WA, 16), suggesting that English rationalism has been set against the intrinsic rootedness of the people of the Welsh hills. In another poem “Hafod Lom,” he sees beauty in the ruins of a ‘poor holding’ and imagines the hardship of the rural life. And yet it is a hardship fused with integrity:

Their long gnawing  
At life’s crust gave them teeth  
And a strong jaw and perseverance  
For the mastication of the fact. (WA, 26)

This last line, in particular, seems a direct contrast with the artificial world of tourism: those in agrarian settings consume ‘fact,’ while those who consume the culture of another are always consuming an artifice, a construction. “Traeth Maelgwn,” for example, paints an equally disturbing picture. Thomas comments on “the marks / On the sand, that mean nothing / And don’t have to do to the fat, / Monoglot stranger” (WA, 31). Here the tourist is portrayed as the gluttonous, idle stranger, in keeping with Thomas’s general preconceptions of the visitors to Wales. In the prose piece “The Welsh Parlour,” his tone is equally deprecatory, for “in Wales . . . one is always arriving,” he states, viewing this in a negative context:

But now thousands have settled, and every year thousands more wear barer the paths up Snowdon and Cader, and around the Pembrokeshire cliffs. Every Bank Holiday sees a fresh pox of litter on the Horseshoe Pass, a new flotilla of ice-cream cups in the eddies at Devil’s Bridge.<sup>226</sup>

Tourism is consistently viewed in terms of both consumerism and artifice in the poems of R.S. Thomas, and the above is no exception – the frivolity and indulgence of the ice-cream, holidaying and careless litter representing, for Thomas, the painful disregard of the English toward the Welsh. The Welsh, also, have in a sense accepted this mode of thinking, for in his view, “in Wales the country and the people have . . . the look of things that are looked at.”<sup>227</sup> Thomas sees the Welsh as having become frozen as part of the inauthentic ‘picture’ of the tourist view. This is fused with repressed anger: “All this

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<sup>226</sup> Thomas, “The Welsh Parlour” 119.

beauty,” Thomas laments, “and all the pain / Of beholding it emptied / of a people who were not worthy of it” (“Deprivation, WA 49). And yet there is similar antipathy for the English who come to Wales in order to ‘penetrate’ it, finding that they are unable to do so, finding out for once, that it is they who are outside:

People, people, the erect species  
 With its restlessness and the need to pay –  
 What have they come here to find?  
 Must they return to the vomit  
 Of the factories? On the conveyer belt  
 Of their interests they circle the town  
 To emerge jaded at the pier;  
 To look at the water with dull eyes  
 Resentfully, not understanding  
 A syllable. Did they expect  
 The sea, too, to be bi-lingual? (WA, 33).

Here is the exact vision that the tourist cannot transcend or penetrate, that is, the linguistic aspect of the Welsh ‘otherness’ that is often not taken into account by the unsuspecting tourist. The poet seems to be making the point here that, though Wales may be “looked at,” it may still retain its own ‘covert’ knowledge, that which will never be ‘open’ to outsiders, despite their demands.

Tourism is, then, yet another example for Thomas of the increasing sense of artifice that clogs the ideal. Yet, if R.S. Thomas is to conceive of himself in any way as ‘part’ of Wales, then he must attempt, paradoxically (since he is both ‘a part’ and ‘apart’), to rise above the vacuous, destructive colonial symbols of commerce and industry. In order to express an identity away from such self-damaging constituents, he must create for himself an alternative cultural space, in which he can attempt, not to authenticate Wales, but at least to try to authenticate his own position and identity *in relation* to Wales.

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<sup>227</sup> Thomas, “The Welsh Parlour” 119.



This 'cultural space' comes into view, quite appropriately, in the very last poem in Welsh Airs, "Fugue for Ann Griffiths." Here is a figure whose spiritual contact with the natural world becomes a kind of metaphor for cultural survival. It is indeed significant, considering the content of Welsh Airs, that this volume ends not with a tribute to a politician or any other figure who engages with politics and public life, but rather with a figure of quiet, spiritual dedication. It is in light of this illuminating figure that Thomas asks his readers: "let us put on speed / to remain still / through the dark hours," (WA, 55) and to find in Griffiths's simple, rural life, a model of spiritual regeneration and repair.

While Ann is viewed, significantly, in a 'national' context, she is considered beyond the corporeal, scatological, brutal dimension of contemporary Wales depicted elsewhere in the collection. In contrast to many of Thomas's other subjects, there is a creative source that enables regeneration: "She who had decomposed / is composed again in her hymns" (WA, 51). Ann becomes a kind of guide for 'truth' and cultural identity, while there is also a suggestion that she is indeed an alter-ego (in a way Iago is not) representing cultural and spiritual values, coupled with the determination Thomas wishes were a part of himself.

Thomas sees Ann's spiritual vision as unique because it also represents a certain simplicity of lifestyle, a rural haven, much like the one Thomas contemplates for Wales.

He envisages:

A nineteenth century  
                                   Calm;  
 that is, a countryside  
                                   not fenced in  
 by cables and pylons,  
 but open to thought to blow in

from as near as may be  
to the truth. (WA, 50)

Ann inhabits a purer Wales, purer environmentally and spiritually (though for Thomas of course these two are linked) and there seems here almost an implicit jealousy, as he is made aware of his own loss in being unable to experience culture in the same way. It is, of course, an idealised notion, but one that nevertheless corresponds with Thomas's yearning for cultural identification. Here, by contrast, there is no waste, no putrefaction, merely an unmarked, natural, free terrain. It is exactly this kind of 'calm' which Thomas seeks, both spiritually and in the quest for 'belonging' – a diversion from the restlessness and insecurity of his own identity.

He addresses Ann for several reasons, both because of the rural, spiritual values she embodies, and also from a feeling of personal connection between her and himself. Dolanog, Ann's home, was not far from Manafon, and in the poem he even reminds the reader in the line "Ann Thomas, Ann Griffiths" that Ann had been a Thomas before she married. There is therefore the feeling of an uncanny affinity – and a desire to recreate his sense of home and identity through her – to give significance to his role, and to reclaim his 'own' name (*proprius*) through recognising its spiritual dimension. He is desirous therefore to create an Ann who is able to alleviate the dissidence he feels towards Wales and the discontent he feels towards his own identity.

It is, however, exactly that - a 'creation' - and it must also be taken into consideration that the construction of artifice he feels to be characteristic of the coloniser and the tourist are also present in his construction of Ann Griffiths. He is after all, constructing her in the way *he* wishes to see her, in a way that best corresponds with his own desires. As she is brought into being, the poem makes it clear that this depends on

Thomas moving the focus away from his own individual concerns, and also on his moving away from present-day Wales, to inhabit, once more, the realm of the “beyond.” Ann Griffiths, it would seem, can only come into being when the self / subject of ‘R.S. Thomas’ has dissipated, as Thomas asks himself: “Has she waited all these years / for me to forget myself / and do her homage?” (WA, 53). She also becomes an extension of himself, as the line “I begin now” acquires a double meaning – in the retelling of the story Thomas also “begins” in the sense that he himself comes to life in a different way, as a different person – while also occupying a different cultural space.

Again, it is significant, particularly from a cultural viewpoint, that Welsh Airs does not conclude by proposing any kind of ‘policy for Wales,’ but rather a policy for how one might live one’s life and aspire to a way of life that can adequately express that which Thomas envisages *as* Wales; that is, aside from the main road of modern life, in a place that is rural, Welsh-speaking, and spiritually aware. It is precisely such a place that Thomas envisages in his 1976 lecture “Abercuawg,” a conceptualisation of an idealised nation-space. It is a view, as M. Wynn Thomas has noted, “that grows parallel to his increasingly jaundiced view of English-language society in Wales,”<sup>228</sup> and one in which he is able to inscribe his own personal vision of national identity in Wales with his Welsh-speaking audience in mind. The context of the lecture, in itself, is significant, especially with regard to Thomas’s personal ‘journeying’ within Welsh-speaking Wales. Here he is, at the 1976 National Eisteddfod of Wales, being asked to address the very community, the very ‘collective’ that has been, in the poetry of the sixties and seventies at least, a sought-after ideal, and a much-disputed reality. While, in one sense, therefore,

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<sup>228</sup> Wynn Thomas, Internal Difference 123.

Wales had become 'open' to him, through the use of the Welsh language, there is still a sense that Thomas has not completely 'come home' to his own vision of Wales, as the lecture makes abundantly clear. There is still therefore, a sense in Thomas of having not achieved his ideal, of being continually outside the cultural authenticity he seeks.

It is not 'where' but 'what' constitutes Abercuawg, that Thomas asks his audience to contemplate. It is a realm that is literally 'neither here nor there' that does not exist in the past, present or future, but which becomes for Thomas an idealised vision of Wales beyond its cultural reality, a spiritual vision. It is the necessity to visualise the ideal that is vital, more than its actuality: "An absence is how we become surer / of what we want," (CP, 340) he writes in the poem of the same name. He stresses once more the importance of constructing identity in a kind of void – a space free from signification. He asks his audience to consider Abercuawg as a symbol of the ideal, as a place that is beyond time. "It is not merely the mind nor yet the senses which bring reality before us, but some other faculty which is both higher and older than these" (SLPR, 127), writes Thomas, noting the spiritual dimension of his vision, while also advocating the use of the imagination. Consider, for example, this assertion, made in a 1971 radio interview:

My standpoint has always been a standing aside. . . . I mean this again arises from the sort of life I've led in Wales. I know Wales pretty well, I've travelled about in it a lot, and the impression I have had of the people I'm interested in are . . . the farm workers standing aside in their fields, the traffic going by, life apparently moving on, but they . . . not necessarily going back or fleeing but turning aside,

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standing aside, occupying, doing their own work in their own place.<sup>229</sup>

It is this notion of “turning aside” that becomes the founding ideology for “Abercuawg.” As Thomas points out, in order to visualise Abercuawg, in order to enter this state of Thomas’s ideal indigenous Welsh identity, one must have the ability to transcend what is already there. One must have the ability to turn aside not only from the modern, globalised, cosmopolitan world and its values, but from a Wales that has become imbued with these values. Adhering to reality ultimately would be to dissipate the dream, for as Thomas writes: “if I attempt to catch and comprehend it with the brain alone it will become ashes in my hand” (SLPR, 129). In order to keep such an ideal alive, one must realise that it *is* an ideal – an unobtainable one that is ultimately to do with one’s cultural aspirations. It is, then “a matter of continuing the search” (SLPR, 130), and of “preserving it as an eternal possibility” (SLPR, 131).

Such ideas again remind one of Bhabha’s initial assertion in The Location of Culture that “It is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the *beyond*” (LC, 1). In post-colonial identities, the “beyond” becomes a theoretical realm within which to assert ‘differences’ of identity for the minority culture. Again, the inhabitant of a minority culture often becomes plagued by those questions of authenticity and definitions of ‘difference’: for in a minority culture it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain a homogenous identity. The minority identity, therefore, does often not have the same kind of unifying forces that belong to the majority culture, those images and motifs that can be exercised positively (for often they are exercised negatively, as has

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been discussed, through the figure of the stereotype). The colonised identity must therefore find 'new' means of expressing itself, that does not, perhaps, depend on a collective tradition, or notions of an idealised past. It is this, no doubt, that Thomas has in mind when he fears "the cry of the compromisers" (SLPR, 132). For these compromisers, Thomas writes, the answer would be to create an ideal out of that which already constitutes the living reality of the nation, i.e. a 'free' nation that is bilingual, and which responds to the modern condition of Wales. To the contrary, Thomas believes that it is precisely by "interfering with contemporary developments" (SLPR, 132) within Wales that Abercuawg must be visualised, for it is an aspiration – and as an aspiration it must continue to be at the furthest point of any 'colonial' or bilingual reality.

"Abercuawg" stands in the realm of the beyond, as a liminal space of signification. In Bhabha's terms Abercuawg is a place / concept that:

signifies spatial distance, marks progress, promises the future; but our intimations of exceeding the barrier or boundary – the very act of going *beyond* – are unknowable, unrepresentable, without a return to the 'present' which, in the process of repetition, becomes disjunct and displaced.

(LC, 4)

While Abercuawg, therefore, is, on the one hand, an attempt to move 'beyond' the present, beyond the cultural / colonial reality, it is also a space that is inexorably bound to the present reality. In becoming the contemporary world's polarity, its double, it also casts disjunction on the present – in visualising Abercuawg, in creating this aspiration, it suggests that there can be no return to the present reality, for to visualise Abercuawg also

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<sup>229</sup> Transcript of "Religion in its Contemporary Context", BBC Radio 4, 6 October 1971.

changes the nature of the world within which one is living. In a sense, believing in Abercuawg also manifests that which is profoundly disturbing, alien, or uncanny even, about one's present situation. The aspiration disturbs the reality; in becoming its 'other' it has the power to destabilise what is already there.

Because that which is sought can never be attained, it also acquires a haunting dimension. "We are searching, therefore, within time, for something which is above time, and yet, which is ever on the verge of being" (SLPR, 130), writes Thomas, again alluding to the fact that its power is also in its perpetual 'un-being.' It is a conception constantly in flux, and also never 'fixed' in its identity – which can, again, become an empowering quality, for it is an adversary to the "fixed tablet of tradition," that asserts itself in the name of culture. Abercuawg rather "is something that is forever coming into existence, not something which has been frozen once and for all" (SLPR, 131).

One may be inclined to ask, perhaps, whether such "unreality" evokes a sense of the uncanny? Here is, once more, an 'unreal' state of being, an ideal existence that yet does *not, cannot* exist; it is the feeling of something beyond reach that will never be attained, "that everlasting occasion which we can neither see nor comprehend, but which nevertheless compels our acceptance" (SLPR, 130). However, it is unreal for a reason: it is an aspiration rather than an enforced, inescapable dimension of unreality. "Through striving to see it, through longing for it, through refusing to accept that it belongs to the past" (SLPR, 131), this is how Abercuawg can become a possibility. It is his own decisive statement of cultural identity, and one is reminded of this in Thomas's bold assertion that: "For such a place I am ready to make sacrifices, maybe even to die" (SLPR, 125).

Another crucial text in this context is “Undod,” which was delivered as the J.R. Jones lecture at the University College of Swansea in December 1985, and subsequently published in 1988. Again, this was a piece written originally in Welsh, and initially addressed to a Welsh-speaking audience; a prose piece that searches for a kind of unity within Thomas’s self, through an exploration of the Unity of Being, the Unity of humankind, and the Unity of Wales, and an attempt, once more, to combat the alienating factors of the uncanny and the unhomely. ‘Unity’ as a concept stands at the extreme pole from the uncanny, as being a kind of defence against alienation within oneself, and the sense of fragmentation and dissolution of identity that the uncanny generates. In contrast ‘unity’ is the strengthening, reinforcing element: it suggests the positivism of a definite identity, to know who one is, to know to whom and where one belongs. Also – like Abercuawg – it becomes an aspiration, an ideal to be aimed for, rather than an immediate solution or a definite reality.

In searching for ‘unity,’ Thomas, in contrast to many of his earlier pieces, is extremely aware of the danger of mistaking the ideal for the reality. The lecture is split into three subheadings, The Unity of Being, The Unity of Humankind, and the Unity of Wales. Although they are considered separately, this manifests Thomas’s desire to contemplate each as part of the other. In the same way that he manifests a belief in physics’ version of nature in which “no part of the universe can be harmed or abused without awakening echoes throughout the whole web” (SLPR, 148), Thomas also demonstrates how national identity is bound to personal notions of existence. Here science offers a rational, original viewpoint on the natural chain of events, so that, in



effect, problems of identity and existence are not seen in isolation but as part of a vaster scientific hypothesis. As Christopher Morgan argues, in reference to “Unity:”

one discovers a surprising argument in support of pure science as an effective opening to philosophy, as uniquely integrative, and as not only facilitating the highest modes of paradoxical thought but as, for Thomas, a force and method of spiritual regeneration.<sup>230</sup>

Science can also offer a seeming solution to the problem, a point at which scientific hypothesis can offer a rational solution to problems of a psychological, personal nature. He sees the connection between physics and spirituality, noting that “Contemporary physics’ vision of the nature of being is far more similar to that of a poet or saint” (SLPR, 148).

Physics also offers a rationalisation of identity and being that can be placed as an adversary to feelings of an uncanny nature, in particular those instabilities in Thomas’s national / personal self. Here, as in his vision of “Abercuawg,” what Thomas shows is not the exact definition or actualisation of “unity,” but once more, the aspiration, the importance of *belief* in such unity. He sees the uncanniness of sparse moments of intimate unity:

You might expect that the fact that we all partake of that valuable gift would be enough to unite us in defending and cherishing it. But it is quite otherwise all too often; and as the population grows larger and larger, life is in great

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danger of being devalued. Imagine any accident in a big, busy city. For a few minutes there is fear and anxiety; then the traffic starts again, as if nothing had happened.

(SLPR, 150)

The above registers those fleeting moments of unity that are so often present in communal life – the moment of recognition between individuals of a common concern. And yet, it is exactly that, the *fleeting* moment that is so often lost. Arguably, such a moment is symptomatic of the uncanny – the notion of a sudden familiarity – that once again becomes just as suddenly replaced by alienation and passivity. In striving for this kind of intimate, communal unity, therefore, Thomas is once again attempting to counteract the uncanny propensity. Thomas also sees unity as being, first and foremost, a personal preoccupation: one must first unite the estranging elements within oneself, before one is able to exercise an “uniting” influence upon others. It is necessary that “you begin by being at one with yourself, able to live at peace with yourself, and thus able to interact with others upon the same basis” (SLPR, 153).

What of the unity of Wales, therefore? How does this relate to Thomas’s sense of self? As has already been demonstrated in his lecture “Abercuawg,” the unity of Wales, the notion of the Welsh people “occupying a given territory, having their own language, and needing to struggle against invaders from outside who possessed their own language” (SLPR, 158), must be contemplated before any kind of cultural identity can be established. Thomas here stresses the linguistic necessity of the ideal, and the fact that a Welsh identity means little without the language itself. In contrast to his 1974 volume, he

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<sup>230</sup> Christopher Morgan, *Identity, environment, and deity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) 93.

seems to know exactly what a Welshman is: “When I am asked: what is a Welshman? I unfailingly answer: a man who speaks Welsh.” (SLPR, 155)

Above all, culture is seen as an intrinsic part of the natural world, again prompting Thomas’s belief of the ‘interconnected’ element of being. He states:

I see no other way to unity in Wales except through the Welsh language. We must start and finish with that, or all our other efforts will be of no use. What is Wales without its native tongue? I am a bird-watcher. Every autumn in Llŷn I love to watch the migratory birds flowing down the peninsula on their way south. Because of the wet summer and the persistent south-westerly winds, they did not come this year. It was a sad experience wandering over Mynydd Mawr in the early morning, and walking the lanes and hollows, without seeing any. It was like a museum. I told everyone: “I remember how it used to be, the sky and the lanes full”. It is a symbol of Llŷn without Welsh, the deadness would be there; beautiful names like Mynytho, Mellteyrn and Tudweiliog being mutilated by English lips (SLPR, 156).

As Thomas states here, it is against such “deadness” that his unity of being must strive, towards a realisation of cultural identity that becomes actively, positively and imaginatively engaged. Here, the absence of the migratory birds becomes a haunting symbol of a divided, fragmented Wales, but as the poet expresses in his poem

“Abercuawg,” it is also somehow imperative for his construction of identity, for “an absence is how we become surer / Of what we want” (CP, 340). Through its absence, Thomas is able to visualise the living, ebullient, active culture of Wales, one interconnected to all things, and through striving for which “we can take our place as an honourable, small part of the seamless garment of humanity” (SLPR, 158). Thomas’s parting statement here is that it is only in an *united* Wales that culture can become ‘authentic’ and it is towards such a perception of Wales that Thomas strives – towards a notion in which he himself can be united with his own personal sense of Welsh identity.

## Conclusion: “[A] shifting / identity never your own.”<sup>231</sup>

As this study concludes, it is perhaps worth briefly considering the recent interview given by R.S. Thomas’s son, Gwydion Thomas, to Walford Davies in the Summer 2004 edition of the *New Welsh Review*. This is a revealing, and relatively controversial interview, in which Gwydion discusses at length the relationship, indeed, the *lack* of relationship, between himself and his father. He records a distance between them and a detachment on his father’s behalf that is often characteristic of the displaced, complex identity seen throughout the course of this study, while also detailing Thomas’s manifest unease with other people. R.S. Thomas and his wife, Mildred (Elsi) Eldridge, are seen in terms of their acute loneliness, their art becoming their primary means of communication and intimacy. Gwydion remarks:

I think they both must have been quite lonely. But they would never admit it. So writing and painting needed to serve as dialogue and conversation and an emotional embrace.<sup>232</sup>

Although several assertions made by Gwydion Thomas in this particular interview are less than favourable towards his father, this statement, at least, is an attempt at understanding the root of Thomas’s complex identity, seeing him as the lonely, creative individual, whose tendency was to use art as an attempt at communication, often in order to transcend the self. What this also suggests, of course, is that art became a means of communicating inner conflicts to the outside world, confessing his “scurrilous thoughts”

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<sup>231</sup> R.S. Thomas, *No Truce with the Furies* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1995) 31.

to paper, in a way he was otherwise unable to do. Art became, for R.S. Thomas (and evidently also for Mildred Eldridge), a means of relating to something 'other,' a means of counteracting alienation and loneliness.

As suggested in the introduction to this study, R.S. Thomas is a poet whose identity is a continually contentious issue for his readers and critics and whose work, even now, remains true to its reputation of raising difficult, even unanswerable questions. This study in itself testifies to the heterogeneous discursive possibilities of Thomas's work. The theoretical sources employed here have been, at a basic level, a means of enabling a coherent and, as far as possible, an *impersonal* discussion of many of Thomas's intensely personal complexities. An attempt has also been made to elucidate many of Thomas's seeming instabilities through the use of psychoanalytical and post-colonial theory; two approaches that, while being apparently contrasting (personal / individual verses cultural / socio-political) can also be seen as complementary in that the socio-political situation impinges on, and has profound personal implications for, the individual psyche. Theory, in this study, becomes a means of confronting and analysing the many difficulties Thomas poses as both man and poet. It is also a means of exploring the divide between the private and public individual in Thomas, and, to borrow Schelling's term that has been used frequently throughout this thesis, to "bring to light that which ought to have remained secret and hidden." Above all, it is an attempt to capture something of the terror, fear and outsider-ness that recurs throughout Thomas's early work, and how the effects of the uncanny and the unhomely can be used in order to

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<sup>232</sup> Walford Davies, "'Quietly as Snow': Gwydion Thomas, an interview." *New Welsh Review* 64 (Summer 2004): 48.

illustrate, and perhaps clarify, Thomas's many contradictions, liminalities and ambivalent, multifaceted perspectives.

This theoretical framework also corresponds with recent developments in the field of Welsh writing in English that has seen critical approaches to the situation of Wales's anglophone culture from the perspective of post-colonial thinking. Recent work has, for instance, made use of the work of Bhabha, Said and others. To name only a few, there is M. Wynn Thomas's essay "Hidden Attachments," Corresponding Cultures: The Two Literatures of Wales (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999); Kirsti Bohata's "Beyond Authenticity? Hybridity and Assimilation in Welsh Writing in English," Nations and Relations: Writing Across the British Isles, ed. Tony Brown and Russell Stephens (Cardiff: New Welsh Review, 2000) and the same author's Postcolonialism Revisited: Writing Wales in English (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004). Such works conclude that the theoretical basis provided by Bhabha, Said, and other post-colonial critics indeed shed light on many of the complexities and instabilities of the identity of the previously labelled 'Anglo-Welsh' writer but now recognised rather as the less-dichotomised 'Welsh writer in English.'

The field of the uncanny, on the other hand, is a field that has received little attention as yet within Welsh writing in English, and there is perhaps yet more work to do on this element of fear and alienation within the English-language Welsh writer's perspective. There is also room to expand this particular discussion of Thomas's poetry. A study of Thomas's later poetry, in particular those poems relating to his struggle with technology and the threat to his identity presented by the world of the machine, the uncanny "automaton" (in Freud's terms), would indeed be illuminating. It is perhaps

worth taking into consideration, in light of the findings of this study, those texts that have implicitly discussed, and yet not explicitly *named* the uncanny, such as M. Wynn Thomas's lecture "R.S. Thomas: War Poet," or his essay "Poetry of the Sixties," Katie Gramich's "Self and M(O)ther in R.S. Thomas's poetry," or Barbara Prys-Williams's "The Echoes Return Slow as Autobiography," to name only a few.<sup>233</sup> These texts show that many of Thomas's critics have already begun to think of the poet in terms of alienation and dislocation; the uncanny is thus able to give such viewpoints a specific, theoretical framework.

Before moving on, however, to consider the overall conclusion of this study, it is perhaps first necessary to recapitulate some of the main findings. It is worth bearing in mind the term *proprius*, a term used frequently in this study meaning 'one's own,' in considering the question of Thomas's identity. Ultimately, this is a study that explores Thomas's increasing awareness of his identity as something that is *not* 'his own.' The title-quotation of this thesis, taken from the poem "Reflections" in No Truce with the Furies, seems to encapsulate this self-estrangement perfectly. In looking into the mirror, Thomas registers how "gaspingly / you partake of a shifting / identity never your own,"<sup>234</sup> that is, one always feels a kind of uncanny distance between oneself and one's identity as manifested in a reflection. The inability to be able to say, *that is me, I am that person, I own that reflection*. Or, to use an example that is within the chronological

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<sup>233</sup> The work of other Welsh writers have been approached critically in a similar way. See Stephen Knight's "The Voices of Glamorgan: Gwyn Thomas's Colonial Fiction," and Diane Green's "From Pig Sty to Benin Head: Modernism and Post-Colonialism in Emyr Humphreys's *Jones*," both in *New Welsh Review* 7 (2001/2): 16-49.

<sup>234</sup> Thomas, No Truce with the Furies 31.



boundary of this study, it is useful also to turn to the poem “Who?” that appeared first in Pietà in 1966, and in which Thomas writes:

...there's an underlying despair  
 Of what should be most certain in my life:  
 This hard image that is reflected  
 In mirrors and in the eyes of my friends (CP, 177).

As can be seen here, it is not with simplicity and ease that Thomas regards himself, but with “underlying despair” (an intimation of the uncanny), manifesting, once again, a despair in the fact that he is not comfortable in recognising such an image as ‘his own.’ Once more, a sense of unnaturalness and abnormality arises, Thomas recognizing that this is “what should be most certain in my life” (CP, 177), and yet, there is a sense of arbitrariness attached to his very existence: “Someone must have thought of putting me here; / It wasn't myself did it.” (CP, 177) It is this sense of *proprius* that Thomas ultimately lacks, for his identity is continually disarranged and disrupted, a feeling that he himself is powerless. At the very root of this study therefore, is the realisation that as Thomas attempts to construct himself, he is ultimately constructing himself *for* himself, attempting to ‘render familiar’ those elements that have become *unfamiliar* – as unfamiliar as the self one sees staring back from the mirror.

The notion of the uncanny, derived from Freud and developed by contemporary critics such as Nicholas Royle, provides a reading of R.S. Thomas that succeeds in drawing out the inherent fear Thomas feels in perceiving his own displacement in the world. This indicates that, while Thomas's identity may be fragmentary, there is a discursive means of looking at this problem, a specific ‘quality of feeling’ that can be ascribed to many of the previously overlooked incidents of alienation in Thomas's account of his own life. It is not merely insecurity that becomes evident here, but a way

of looking at the world that is imbued with deep alienation, even terror. Throughout his early years, his college years, and even through to his experience of Manafon, the hill farmers and Prytherch, Thomas remains detached and removed, finding himself increasingly alienated in these respective communities, more so through his own actions than the actions of others. This experience of outsidership, and his own compulsion to *be* an outsider, is frequently captured in his own words: he would “sometimes during a merry dance . . . go outside and look through the windows at the merry crowd inside, and see it all as something completely unreal.” (A, 38) This account of his days as an undergraduate could almost serve as a description of Thomas’s whole experience of the uncanny, this strange, repeated distance between himself and the life he felt was “to be lived” (A, 10).

The comparative study, in the second chapter, of Hugh MacDiarmid and R.S. Thomas is, in many ways therefore, a means of demonstrating one of Thomas’s most specific attempts at counteracting the uncanny, and of *actively* engaging his identity. There is a desire here, different to that which is manifested in his early years, to be noticed, to be a distinct, iconic figure, and to be, like MacDiarmid, a “real bard who sang things till they came” (LP, 81). Despite Thomas’s advocating Lucky Poet as an important cultural text, little attention has been paid to this particular text by R.S. Thomas’s critics, and this chapter deals specifically with many of the aspects of MacDiarmid’s life that bear a striking resemblance to the life subsequently led by Thomas. Thomas’s attraction to the political and cultural figure of MacDiarmid, in itself, is *not* uncanny; it is rather a move Thomas makes in order to ‘belong,’ in order to locate his national longing. However, the uncanny remains a distant presence, for there is, to some degree, the sense

of a 'phantom text' and an 'uncanny double' to be seen here. In many ways, MacDiarmid also becomes somewhat of a diversion for Thomas, Thomas being in search, by this time, of an ideal – one that would serve to cement his identity – in the form of the "true Wales of my imagination" (A, 10). MacDiarmid becomes for Thomas a means of exploring this cultural identity, and a means of enabling Thomas to renounce, temporarily, his sense of aloneness. Towards the end of the chapter it is possible to see that MacDiarmid, also, for all his bravado, longing for leadership, and intellectual arrogance, is prey to similar forces of the uncanny. As the concluding comparative study of "The Mountains" and "Annals of the Five Senses" goes on to argue, here are two writers plagued by issues of a fragmentary, insecure selfhood, for whom nationalism has become an ultimate saviour, and an urgent cause.

This, of course, moves the thesis on to its overall conclusion, and to the post-colonial ideas explored in the third chapter of the thesis. There may be nothing extremely inventive, by now, about placing Wales in the post-colonial context, but it *is* interesting to consider Thomas himself as manifesting many of the complexities of the post-colonial subject, especially in linking these ideas with the uncanny. In considering specifically Homi K. Bhabha's The Location of Culture, this third chapter attempts to show how Thomas, in seeking to identify with Wales, often becomes caught in a position of ambivalence and liminality. Yet again, Thomas becomes 'undone' and finds that his cultural identity cannot be fulfilled in his much-idealised Wales. This leaves him in a strange in-between position, in which, as he has famously been cited as saying, he can become "neither one thing nor the other." (SLPR, 137) It is during this period that Thomas is viewed as becoming prey to the 'unhomely,' itself a branch of the uncanny.

Bhabha is a critic whose work has been informed by psychoanalysis and post-structuralism, and whose theories are based on power divisions and instabilities of identity; in this way his work implicitly expands, yet again, the question of uncanny identity, this time, in a cultural context. Through the use of David Punter's work, in which contemporary intimations of the post-colonial focus on more intricate experiences of post-colonial subjugation and uncanniness, it is also possible to analyse and explore the cultural defence seen in the stylistic devices of the post-colonial writer, and to look at instances of fear, hallucination and hatred that manifests itself in R.S. Thomas's, arguably post-colonial, writing.

This third chapter, therefore, takes the psychoanalytic framework of the uncanny and transposes it to a cultural, post-colonial context. What this does, in the context of Thomas's work, is focus specifically on how the uncanny develops into a more acute sense of cultural non-belonging. "The true Wales of my imagination" (A, 10) becomes a place of dead-ends, of haunting, and of a distinctly 'unreal' quality. Thomas's attempt to unite himself culturally in Wales, in fact, further intensifies his sense of loss and his longing for unity. One needs to question, perhaps, in this context, if a lecture such as "Abercuawg" succeeds in *cementing* Thomas's identity, or whether it emphasises, yet again, his alienation. While this position, that is, on the stage in front of Welsh-speaking Wales, granted him a 'homecoming' in a way, the very ideology of the lecture itself implies that Thomas's "true Wales" was still beyond his reach. What becomes evident from the very concept of 'Abercuawg,' is that Thomas *remained* disillusioned with the reality of Wales, still searching for the 'other,' for unity within himself, and within a cultural collective.

The collection Welsh Airs, as previously discussed, ends with a consideration of the more spiritual presence in the figure of Ann Griffiths, and the ways in which Thomas attains a less agonised realisation of the failings of the “real” in comparison to the ideal. As Thomas begins to recognise these alienating factors within himself, the only way, seemingly, in which he is able to counter these alienating factors is through a kind of spiritual transcendence. As this thesis has attempted to demonstrate, through its concluding analysis of “Fugue for Ann Griffiths,” “Undod,” and “Abercuawg,” there are here instances in which Thomas is able, and is indeed desperately seeking, to find a kind of spiritual plane which can give rise to the imaginative conceptualisation of identity. As is manifested through his creation of “Abercuawg,” the idealised nation-space, it is not the place itself that is important for Thomas, but rather the ability to *visualise* such a place. What one sees in all three of these defining works, predominantly, is Thomas’s move towards a notion of a higher reality, an ability to transcend the limitations of his own life, through the use of an altogether higher power – the imagination. For Thomas, the imagination is a means through which the self can achieve unity, and the power to recreate the real, to enter a higher reality as a means of spiritual survival. As he tells John Ormond in an interview in 1972:

People, no doubt, are worried by the use of the word imagination, because imagination to many people has a fictional connotation, fictional overtones. Of course, I’m using the word imagination in its Coleridgean sense, which is the highest means known to the human psyche of getting into contact with the ultimate reality; imaginative truth is

the most immediate way of presenting ultimate reality to a human being.<sup>235</sup>

This notion therefore, of presenting 'ultimate reality' is evidently a striking contrast to many of the instances of artifice and *unreality* that Thomas seems to have experienced, and which he expresses in his work. What he seeks, ultimately, is continuity and tradition, not only in a cultural sense, but within a spiritual dimension. He notes that "That's why I've chose to live in the country, because not only from the auditory point of view but also from the visual point of view – one has been blessed with these sudden glimpses of eternity."<sup>236</sup> In contrast, the uncanny and the unhomely are rather those destabilising forces that suggest incompleteness, dissipation and decay. There is no sense of 'eternity' in the uncanny or the unhomely, only a sense that things could at any given moment come to an end: the fear of death and annihilation, the fear that the house will crumble, the roof will cave in. In stark contrast, therefore, "eternity" emerges as "Abercuawg," the symbol, and the means, through which he is able to visualise, not only national and cultural continuity, but the preservation of his own identity, and to consider with ease his own 'place' in the universe.

Ultimately, of course, this struggle for unity must be seen in terms of his religious identity, and the large body of religious poetry that is to come subsequent to the necessarily limited chronological account found in this study. His comment, in reaching Aberdaron, that he had "wrung that dishcloth dry" (MS, 42) as far as his nationalist identity was concerned, also indicates his poetic move towards a more spiritual search for

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<sup>235</sup> "R.S. Thomas: Priest and Poet." A transcript of John Ormond's film for B.B.C. Television, broadcast 2 April 1972; introduced by Sam Adams. *Poetry Wales Special Issue* 7 no. 4 (1972): 53-54.

<sup>236</sup> Thomas, *Poetry Wales Special Issue* 55.

identity, his questioning of faith, and his constant dialogue with God. Again, this is not uncanny or unhomely, for Thomas at last is able to secure his identity in terms of his relationship with God. As R.S. Thomas suggests, while all human beings may be 'unhomed' within their mortal lives, he, at least, has an awareness of where his ultimate 'home' may be, and asserts:

that eternity is not something over there, not something in the future; it is close to us, it is all around us and at any given moment one can pass into it; but there is something about our mortality, the fact that we are time-bound creatures, that makes it somehow difficult if not impossible to dwell, whilst we are in the flesh, to dwell permanently in what I would call the Kingdom of Heaven. But that it is close and that we get these overtones, that we get these glimpses of it, is certainly my most deeply held conviction.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>237</sup> Thomas, *Poetry Wales Special Issue 56*.

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