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**R.S. Thomas's God  
: the possibilities of symbiosis**

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# **R.S. Thomas's God: The Possibilities of Symbiosis**

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## Abstract

This thesis contends that the lodestar of R. S. Thomas's theological thinking is not metaphysics but hermeneutics. Specifically, while discussing the whole range of Thomas's poetry, from the work of the Manafon years onwards, and including the ekphrastic sequences, the thesis suggests that Thomas's religious poetry does not present us with ontologically-premised 'models' of divinity; rather, the thesis argues that Thomas is much more interested in examining and exploring the various reasons why man feels compelled to 'interpret' divinity in a particularly 'metaphysical' manner. The thesis argues that a central theme in much of Thomas's religious poetry pivots on an appeal for perceptual and thus conceptual renewal. Thomas, it is argued, is neither religiously 'orthodox' nor religiously 'heterodox'; his religious poems do not project a specific 'metaphysics' of divinity—such as the supposition that God is 'absent'—but posit that one-dimensional theological formulations stem from theological misinterpretations. Thomas, therefore, is read as a religious poet whose primary intellectual goal is to contest and then eradicate theological confusions, and, the thesis maintains, the poet often stresses that these confusions stem from theological unawareness. Whereas most Thomas scholarship asserts that the poet is indeed hypothesising an explicitly 'metaphysical' understanding of divinity, this thesis states that much of Thomas's religious poetry has the intention of demolishing ontological paradigms. The thesis argues that Thomas's religious poetry presents a 'symbiotic' understanding of divinity. God must not be understood via a single predicate; for example, we must not attempt to comprehend the Being of God through the metaphysical postulations that He is absent, immanent, or transcendent. Rather, predicative symbioses provide us with the best way of understanding God. In addition, the thesis argues that this symbiotic understanding of God is ripe with intellectual possibilities; that is, our religious imaginations are refreshed as soon as we become aware of predicative complexity in

regard to descriptions of God. It is also argued that the crux of Thomas's religious verse is not ontology but psychology; the poet wants us to examine the foundations of our religious nomenclature and, by extension, he wishes us to investigate the reasons why we feel duty-bound to construe divinity by means of ontology. The thesis therefore argues that Thomas's religious poetry performs an essentially cathartic, or even 'therapeutic', function. Thomas dismantles theological ontology and, by so doing, he shows us that our theological suppositions and conjectures often originate from a misleading point of departure. Thomas's religious poetry reengineers needlessly 'metaphysical' machinery in our theological understanding; his poems challenge largely-accepted religious rubrics and demonstrate the necessity for intellectual reform. In Thomas's theological lexicon, the thesis argues, faith is cognate with doubt and vice versa. The thesis maintains that Thomas's religious poems do not so much project a specific understanding of divinity, as disclose fallacious theological archetypes. Thus, the broad argument of the thesis is that Thomas's religious poetry is intended to expose, and subsequently undermine, inaccurate theological thinking, with the eventual intention of revitalising man's religious comprehension.

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## Abbreviations

Collections by R. S. Thomas referred to in the text:

*The Stones of the Field* (Carmarthen: Druid Press, 1946). *SF*

*An Acre of Land* (Newton: Montgomeryshire Printing Company, 1952). *AL*

*The Minister* (Newton: Montgomeryshire Printing Company, 1953). *M*

*Song at the Year's Turning: Poems 1942-1954* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1955). *SYT*

*Poetry for Supper* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1958). *PS*

*Tares* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1961). *T*

*The Bread of Truth* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1963). *BT*

*Pietà* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1966). *P*

*Not That He Brought Flowers* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1968). *NTHBF*

*Young and Old* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1972). *YO*

*Laboratories of the Spirit* (London: Macmillan, 1975). *LS*

*The Way of It* (Sunderland: Coelfrith Press, 1977). *WI*

*Frequencies* (London: Macmillan, 1978). *F*

*Between Here and Now* (London: Macmillan, 1981). *BHN*

*Later Poems, 1972-1982* (London: Macmillan, 1983). *LP*

*Ingrowing Thoughts* (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1985). *IT*

*Destinations* (Shipston-on-Stour: Celandine Press, 1985). *D*

*Experimenting with an Amen* (London: Macmillan, 1986). *EA*

*The Echoes Return Slow* (London: Macmillan, 1988). *ERS*

*Counterpoint* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1990). *C*

*Mass for Hard Times* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1992). *MHT*

*No Truce with the Furies* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1995). *NTF*

*Uncollected Poems*, ed. Tony Brown and Jason Walford Davies (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 2013). *UP*

Prose by R. S. Thomas referred to in the text:

*R. S. Thomas: Selected Prose*, ed. Sandra Anstey (Cardiff: Poetry Wales Press, 1983). *SP*



What I'm tilting at is not God, but the ideas of God [...] and I think people might get the wrong end of the stick. Sort of say, "Thomas doesn't believe in God". I believe in God, I'm trying to show how people sometimes attempt to pin down this, this Being who's not a Being.

'R. S. Thomas talks to J. B. Lethbridge', in *Anglo-Welsh Review*, 74 (1983)

Getting hold of the difficulty *deep down* is what is hard. Because if it is grasped near the surface it simply remains the difficulty it was. It has to be pulled out by the roots; and that involves our beginning to think about these in a new way. The change is as decisive as, for example, that from the alchemical to the chemical way of thinking. The new way of thinking is what is so hard to establish.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* (1980)

## Introduction

‘The two professions of priest and poet are so divorced in the public eye as to be quite beyond the possibility of symbiosis’.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this study is to investigate the religious poetry of R. S. Thomas using an hermeneutical paradigm. This does not mean that I believe Thomas’s religious verse is best interpreted according to some ‘all language is about language’ critical template. It does, however, mean that I read many of his poems as commentaries upon, as well as explorations of, the complicated interplay between theological semantics, religious belief, and theological ontology. To borrow a term from the contemporary philosopher Richard Kearney, the hermeneutical paradigm applied here could be condensed into a ‘metaphorological’ approach to the poems.<sup>2</sup> I propose to argue that Thomas’s employment of different types of *metaphora*—‘transference’, ‘transmission’, ‘carrying over’—foregrounds the various ways in which religious poetry can indeed say something of significance about the purportedly ‘unutterable’ nature of God.<sup>3</sup>

‘Priest and poet [...] beyond the possibility of symbiosis’. Notwithstanding R. S. Thomas’s rather sardonic comment, the supposedly dissenting poet spent his entire professional life administering the rituals of orthodox Anglicanism. He was liturgically conformist as well as, according to several prominent scholars anyway, a heterodox religious

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<sup>1</sup> R. S. Thomas, ‘A Frame for Poetry’, in *Selected Prose*, 91.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 2001). By *metaphorology*, Kearney means the ‘understanding of religious language as an endeavour to say something (however hesitant and provisional) about the unsayable [...] it is from the productive friction of their [the ways we ‘metaphorize’ the divine] “intersignification” that some transfer (*metaphora*) of meaning is eventually, if always tentatively, achieved’. 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> The supposition that divinity cannot be ‘said’ is a straightforward consequence of what the Tetragrammaton—the Exodic ‘Name’ (Exodus 3: 14)—appears to denote. The literature on this subject is immense, but see Kearney *The God Who May Be*, chapter two, for an overview of the principal interpretations. Throughout this thesis, Scriptural quotations are taken from the King James version.

poet. He was a zealous Welsh nationalist, although, as M. Wynn Thomas writes, he was also perhaps an ‘exile’ within his own country.<sup>4</sup> He was the monoglot English speaker who by a prolonged and tortuous effort of will mastered the Welsh tongue, yet, by his own admission, never completely surmounted ‘This devilish bilingualism’.<sup>5</sup> Thomas the man seems defined by both certainties *and* inconsistencies and, if that is the case, then an exegetical approach to his religious verse which underscores the *possibility* of a symbiotic comprehension of selfhood and divinity seems appropriate.

The central thrust of the argument pursued here may be summarised as follows: what may the different *forms* of symbiosis as conveyed within Thomas’s religious poetry tell us about ‘an ultimate reality beyond human attainment, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*’?<sup>6</sup> To give the thesis structural coherence I have worked through the collections chronologically. I have also, to some extent, organised the chapters vis-à-vis Thomas’s ‘five aspects’ of religion as expressed in his Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*: ‘the consciousness of God, of the self, of negation, of the impersonal or un-nameable, and of completion’.<sup>7</sup> For instance, following the review of the critical field in chapter one, the second chapter of this thesis aims to investigate the poetry written at Manafon and Eglwys-fach—that is, the volumes from, and including, *The Stones of the Field* (1946) to *Pietà* (1966)—by drawing attention to Thomas’s foregrounding of taxonomy. It will be contended that Thomas’s interest in taxonomy prefigures what I will describe as his later arguments against the anthropomorphic diminution of God. ‘Consciousness of God’ is dependent on taxonomic nomenclature—unless one has a prior conception of what the term ‘God’ actually denotes then one cannot, with any conceptual lucidity, speak of God—and it is certainly arguable that in several of his early and ‘middle period’ poems Thomas is extremely interested in how our awareness of *all* reality is dependent

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<sup>4</sup> See Wynn Thomas’s *R. S. Thomas: Serial Obsessive* (Cardiff: U. W. P., 2013).

<sup>5</sup> R. S. Thomas, ‘The Creative Writer’s Suicide’, in *Selected Prose*, 171.

<sup>6</sup> R. S. Thomas, Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, in *Selected Prose*, 65.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

upon the actual language we employ to verbalise what is real.<sup>8</sup> Through focussing on our descriptive terminology we recalibrate, as well as revitalize, our perceptions of reality. If God is part of what is real, then it follows that by sharpening the perceptual faculty—or, to put it another way, by enhancing our consciousness of ‘self’—we *necessarily* reinvigorate (and so ‘de-anthropomorphize’) our conception of the divine. Therefore, although much of the early and ‘middle period’ poetry is not explicitly religious, the verses written at Manafon and Eglwys-fach provide us with an important means of access to those later verses where linguistic-conceptual rejuvenation often appears to constitute Thomas’s principal theme. The transference, in other words, *from* perception *to* language and vice versa, stimulates a further carrying over to a revitalized understanding of religious concepts.

Chapter three is concerned with the Aberdaron period and, using the work of Jacques Derrida for support, maintains that Thomas’s foremost intention in these volumes is to dismantle the binary opposition between apophatism and cataphatism by firstly separating linguistic from ontological conceptions of divinity. It will be argued that Thomas’s negation of deific predicates—as uttered most forcefully and famously, perhaps, in ‘Via Negativa’ (*H’m*, 16)—actually constitutes a positive approach to divinity. In the Aberdaron collections, the poet is showing that apophasis is simply another method of speciously verbalizing the un-nameable God of the Exodic text. In continuance of this idea, the chapter also argues, this time with reference to the philosopher Jean-Louis Chrétien, that the supposed silence of the ‘Deus Absconditus’ is essentially and unavoidably *voluble*. Thomas is not negating knowledge of God or arguing that deific immanence is a mere chimera, but is instead negating the twin suppositions that God is uncommunicative and impersonal. In addition, the chapter also suggests that Thomas often presents the symbiosis of deific taciturnity and effusiveness

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<sup>8</sup> This, of course, is a ‘Wittgensteinian’ argument. Wittgenstein’s possible influence on Thomas has not yet been examined in any detail, although Thomas was certainly aware of Wittgenstein’s early writing. See *Autobiographies*, 166.

through various *prosopopoeiae*, for the employment of this trope allows the poet to articulate meaningful statements *about* God without capitulating to crude and reductive anthropomorphism. Chapter three, then, continues the second chapter's argument that a symbiotic understanding of divinity occupies the heart of Thomas's religious verse.

The fourth chapter switches attention to Thomas's two volumes of ekphrastic poetry, *Between Here and Now* (1981) and *Ingrowing Thoughts* (1985). As in previous chapters, here also the intention is to show that a significant characteristic of Thomas's verse is the foregrounding of symbiotic tension. Contra the Simonidean aphorism, *pictura loquens, poesis tacens* ('painting is silent poetry; and poetry is painting with the gift of speech'), Thomas's ekphrases do not merely 'voice' the silent work of art but disclose and investigate the complex interplay between visual and verbal representation. Borrowing an appellation from the theorist Lilian Louvel, the ekphrases in the two collections are termed 'iconotexts'; that is, the painting (icon) and the poem (text), symbiotically construct a new and *revitalized* aesthetic entity. It will be argued that in these two collections, perceptual recalibration is once more the thematic keynote. Thomas's iconotexts negate the conventional understanding of ekphrasis as that which merely verbalizes visual or plastic art, and, in so doing, their rhetorical momentum is deciphered as fundamentally anti-pictorialist and non-mimetic. The ekphrases are therefore interpreted as a sub-genre of Thomas's previous interest in apophatic and cataphatic predication. In the same way that earlier poems appear to argue for a 'non-verbalized' symbiosis of the *via negativa* and the *via positiva*, the poems in *Between Here and Now* and *Ingrowing Thoughts* show that ekphrastic representation symbiotically reinvigorates methods of description and therefore methods of seeing. If that is the case, then Thomas's iconotexts also demonstrate the ways in which ekphrasis incites *refreshed* techniques of intellectual comprehension. Furthermore, I will maintain that a type of *prosopopoeia* is also discernable within Thomas's ekphrastic responses, although here the trope performs the rhetorical function

of negating the poem's presumed status as a one-dimensional verbal analogue to the 'original' painting or sculpture. Finally, because ekphrasis is conventionally identified as prosopopoeial in that it aspires to verbalize the inaudible work of art, I will contend that Thomas's ekphrases may be viewed as a further attempt by the poet to identify and investigate the essentially dialogic nature of silence.

Chapter five argues that in *Destinations* (1985) and *Experimenting with an Amen* (1986), Thomas is endeavouring to supplant ontological with non-ontological conceptions of divinity. Specifically, the chapter proposes that the term 'God', as it appears in Thomas's later work, should be understood as phenomenological and hermeneutical, rather than metaphysical or ontological. The chapter relies heavily on the theological, semantic and anti-ontological theories of the philosopher of religion Jean-Luc Marion. The chapter makes specific reference to Marion's two books from 1977 and 1982 respectively: *L' idole et la distance* (*The Idol and Distance*) and *Dieu sans l'etre: Hors-texte* (*God Without Being*). In both works, Marion argues that the *via negativa* leads to little more than an anthropomorphic—and therefore blasphemous or 'idolatrous'—comprehension of divinity. Apophaticism, according to Marion, is simply cataphaticism in subtly different attire, so any attempt to verbalise divinity by means of the negative way is quite simply a futile and irreligious exercise in the construction of 'graven imagery'. Thus, 'apophatic' statements are in reality generated by the speaker's (idolatrous) aspiration to name the un-nameable God of the Exodic text. Marion further argues that *onto-*theology should be discarded in favour of a *theo-*logical approach to divinity: we must abandon the ontological construal of God all together and concentrate instead on techniques of seeing God ('theos' as lexically and metaphysically prior to 'ontology') which do not succumb to the ontological compulsion. The chapter maintains that with *Destinations* and *Experimenting with an Amen*, Thomas is similarly attempting to replace an ontological with a non-ontological conception of divinity. In addition, I will argue that Thomas appears to believe it is necessary

to substitute theological archetypes with theological *praxis*; hence, chapter five continues the argument of previous chapters that much of Thomas's religious verse may be understood as foregrounding revitalized *methods* of seeing. The chapter proposes that Thomas's religious poetry within these two important collections is premised upon the symbiosis of hermeneutical theology and the belief that *praxis* is much more important than metaphysics in recognizing the divine.

The concluding chapter submits that much of Thomas's work from *The Echoes Return Slow* (1988) to *No Truce with the Furies* (1995), often turns on specifically Christological themes.<sup>9</sup> Returning to Thomas's classifications in his Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, many of these texts will be interpreted as poems of theological and teleological 'completion'. Whereas previous poems seemed to focus on ways of comprehending the unnameable God of Exodus 3: 14, I intend to argue that numerous poems within these collections reveal Thomas's profound interest in Christ as the 'Omega' (in metonymic terms, 'end', 'completion') of God. The principal contention is that in the later religious poetry, inflexibly 'ontological' conceptions of God are replaced with a theology of 'eschatological' dynamism and *praxis*. The thought of Jean-Luc Marion will once again be employed as an exegetical fulcrum, for another of Marion's pivotal ideas is that although ontology leads to 'idolatry', 'iconicity' leads to *Christianity*, and I propose to argue that Thomas's doctrine of Christ is best apprehended in an essentially 'iconic' manner. The 'transference' or 'carrying over' in these final poems is *from* the idol *to* the icon, and the icon is defined as that which, through the symbiosis of concealment *and* disclosure, tutors or *re-educates* the gaze. Consequently, the final chapter of this thesis reengages the theme introduced and explored within the second:

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<sup>9</sup> I have not included the posthumously published *Residues* (2002) for two reasons. First, it is uncertain how many of these poems Thomas deemed worthy of publication and, secondly, we have no way of knowing with any precision how he wished to arrange the texts. As is argued in chapter two, Thomas's sequencing of poems within a collection is often significant in regard to the thematic direction of volume as a whole; therefore, it may well be the case that the poems comprising *Residues* were supposed to appear in a particular order which Thomas had yet to finalize.

Thomas's religious poetry is ultimately concerned with *revitalizing* our understanding of divinity.



## Chapter One

### Review of the Critical Field

The wealth of critical material on Thomas necessitates that this review must be somewhat restricted in scope. As such, I intend to limit discussion to those studies which have focussed, either solely or predominantly, on the theistic and philosophical aspects of Thomas's work, as opposed to, for example, its pastoral or postcolonial resonances. There is, of course, a degree of artificiality in this as Thomas' poems seldom admit obvious, thematic classification—as Emily Dickinson wrote, 'True Poems Flee'—nevertheless, it is clear that a specifically religious critical paradigm affords at least one approach to understanding the work as a whole.

#### *1.1 'I have learned/ Silence is best:' R. S. Thomas and the Despondency of Religious Language*

Language, man's habitual tool in this reaching towards God's identity, always falls short. God always eludes us, remaining a mystery in the silence at the heart of things, no matter how keenly the scientist probes and dissects, no matter how much is achieved through imagination and meditation by the poet and mystic—there is always the gap, which is a kind of defence of God's integrity against his creatures.<sup>1</sup>

The lines of connection between us and God have broken down, or God himself has slipped away from the places where he used to be. He no longer inheres in the world as the force binding together all men and all things [...] and can only

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<sup>1</sup> John Barnie, 'R. S. Thomas: *Later Poems, 1972-1982*', in *Poetry Wales*, vol. 18, no. 4 (1985), 92.

be experienced negatively, as a terrifying absence.<sup>2</sup>

In the Winter 2008 edition of *Renascence*, the poet and critic Daven Michael Kari, in comparing the work of St. John of the Cross and Thomas, writes that, 'both authors agree on the centrality of pain as a tool for heightening one's sensitivity to the spiritual world, and both seem to agree in their recognition of the extent to which God is unknowable to the rational mind.'<sup>3</sup> Leaving aside whether or not this relatively unadorned statement is actually true with regard to St. John of the Cross,<sup>4</sup> Kari's emphasis on the supposed 'unknowability' of Thomas's God—a contrast between, perhaps, Johannine 'knowledge' and Pauline 'faith'<sup>5</sup>—has been echoed by many commentators. Helen Fulton, noting the imagery of 'stone, darkness and fearful anticipation'<sup>6</sup> of 'The Empty Church' in *Frequencies*, states that, 'In rejecting the concrete symbols of God's presence, exposing them as primitive, clumsy and ineffectual means used by humans to know the unknowable, R.S. exposed the limits of empiricism,'<sup>7</sup> and Jeremy Hooker, reviewing *H'm* in the 1972 Spring edition of *Poetry Wales*, argues that 'the anguish that R.S.Thomas's best poems express is much nearer in spirit to Kierkegaard, it is of the 'Via Negativa' rather than the dark periods between moments of union with God that Herbert expresses.'<sup>8</sup>

Emphasis on the *via negativa* as the central component in Thomas's theodicy—using the term's original, Leibnitzian denotation—is a keynote of numerous critical methodologies and, for the purposes of this study, the secondary literature may be subdivided into two broad

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<sup>2</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard U., P., 1963), 2.

<sup>3</sup>Daven M. Kari, 'R.S.Thomas and the Dark Night of the Soul: Song, Suffering, and Silence in a Life of Faith,' *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature*, VI. LX, No. 2, Winter (2008), 105.

<sup>4</sup>For an opposing view, see, for example, Eugene A. Maio's *St. John of the Cross: The Imagery of Eros* (Madrid: Playor, S.A, 1973).

<sup>5</sup>Cf. John, 5:13, 'I write this to you who believe (*pisteuousin*) in the name of the Son of God, that you may know (*eidete*) that you have eternal life.'

<sup>6</sup>Helen Fulton, 'R.S.Thomas: The Last Modernist,' in *Heat* 3 (2002), 187.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>Jeremy Hooker, 'R.S.Thomas; *H'm*,' in *Poetry Wales*, Spring (1972), 91.

areas: that which views Thomas's God as absent and thus beyond human knowledge in any significant sense, and that which sees Thomas as advocating an essentially mystical approach to the divine, thus leading to a form of 'blind fideism.' Both these approaches are, by definition, semantically grounded. If God is absent then little can be predicated of Him beyond the primary fact of His absence (as the oft-quoted remark of Simone Weil has it, He is 'present in creation under the form of absence') and if He can only be known in the mystical sense then specifically *intellectual* attempts to comprehend and subsequently explicate His nature must, again by definition, be superfluous prior even to their commencement— as St. Paul dismissively puts it, the best one can hope for in such a position is to impetuously follow 'artificial fables.' ( II Peter 1: 16). M.Wynn Thomas's important *Agenda* essay, 'Irony in the Soul: the religious poetry of R.S [ocrates] Thomas', links Thomas's work in this context to the writings of the contemporary Columbia University theologian Mark C.Taylor, and views the poet's religious epistemology as one of 'infinite fixation on error/ repetition/ renewal/ uncertainty.'<sup>9</sup> Referring to the collections *H'm* and *Young and Old* in particular – and using an overtly Kierkegaardian gloss— Wynn Thomas argues that Thomas is engaged with the evolution of 'forms of writing that are concerned with the disestablishment of the self'<sup>10</sup> and that several poems in *H'm* especially, are 'satiric exercises in the semiotics of “religion”, disclosures of those pseudo-religious systems of signification by which man dignifies his will-to-power by pleading divine precedent and sanction.'<sup>11</sup> According to Wynn Thomas's trim phrase, there is a 'radical doubleness' in Thomas's religious discourse, and he further argues that the key to unlocking what in a slightly

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<sup>9</sup>M. Wynn Thomas, 'Irony in the Soul: the religious poetry of R.S [ocrates] Thomas,' in *Agenda: A Tribute to R.S. Thomas*, 36. 2 (1998), 50. Wynn Thomas cites Taylor's *Tears* (Albany: State University of New York, 1990), in which he writes that 'every verbal attempt at revealing the mystery of divinity turns into a revealing of it,' 110. Dennis Brown in his article for *The David Jones Journal* also notes that Thomas's poetry is consonant with the theological speculations of Taylor, 'R.S.T.,' *The David Jones Journal*, R.S. Thomas Special Issue, Summer/Autumn (2001), 132.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 53. Wynn Thomas is referring specifically to 'The River', 'Echoes' and 'Petition.' These poems, he continues, are 'powerful examples of the way Thomas temporises in the root sense of the word: that is, he procrastinates in order to re-present the baffling character of human life as engaged in time and yet engaged to eternity.' Ibid., 55.

different context Damian Walford Davies has termed 'the great metaphysical poetry of the later years,'<sup>12</sup> is an understanding of Thomas's imaginative theodicy as a fusion of the Socratic<sup>13</sup> and Kierkegaardian dialectics: 'any human attempt to formulate statements about God is bound to be internally inconsistent, is bound to collapse under its own weightiness.'<sup>14</sup> In this reading, Thomas's dominant argumentative mode is that of maieutic irony and his poetry, 'a record of the endlessly unstable, mutating terms on which such a consciousness understands ultimate existence. He writes poems precisely because they are provisional, existential reports; he writes religious poems precisely because they are disposable theology.'<sup>15</sup>

A paper by Christine Meilicke from the same year, concentrating also on collections from the 1970s, looks at Thomas's work through a comparable lens of 'dualistic and gnostic imagery.'<sup>16</sup> Taking as her starting point the speculation that many of the major poems from this period demonstrate a 'denial of fundamental Christian dogmas concerning the nature of God,'<sup>17</sup> Meilicke argues that 'Repeat' (*H'm*, 26), uses as its organisational and thematic pivot the Marcionistic/ Manichean idea that, 'two divine attributes, which are felt to be mutually exclusive, can be distributed among two different gods'.<sup>18</sup> Meilicke also argues that such

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<sup>12</sup>Damian Walford Davies, "'Yeats Said That': R.S.Thomas and W.B.Yeats', in *Almanac: A Yearbook of Welsh Writing in English*, ed. Katie Gramich, vol. 13 (2008-9), 14. Walford Davies skilfully argues that Thomas's reading of Yeats led the Welsh poet to a similar transposition of 'political crisis into new existential and metaphysical contexts,' one of which was an 'unceasing exploration of the instabilities of his own identity [which] testifies to a conception of self that is in many ways Yeatsian.' *Ibid.*, 7-9.

<sup>13</sup>An important aspect of the Socratic tradition concerns the correct usage of words and therefore a delineation of what can meaningfully be said/ predicated of a particular subject-term. See Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) for a detailed discussion of the issues involved.

<sup>14</sup>'Irony in the Soul', 59. Emphasis in original. As a coda to this, Wynn Thomas also draws attention to the influence of Borges on Thomas and argues that Thomas, much like Borges in 'The God's Script,' attempts to creatively appropriate an 'inscrutable God, who signs himself only in cipher.' *Ibid.*, 56. The Borgian/ Thomasian parallels have been explored in detail by Wynn Thomas in the *Renascence* paper " 'The Fantastic Side of God': R.S. Thomas and Jorge Luis Borges'".

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 68. 'Maieutic irony', as Wynn Thomas notes, is a Kierkegaardian term, 'maieutic' being defined as: (from the OED and quoted by Wynn Thomas, 65) 'the Socratic process of helping a person to bring into full consciousness conceptions previously latent in his mind.'

<sup>16</sup>Christine Meilicke, 'Dualism and Theodicy in R.S.Thomas' Poetry,' in *Literature and Theology*, vol. 14, no. 4, (December 1998), 407.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 408.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 409.

'theological and poetical variants cannot be easily harmonised into one coherent system.'<sup>19</sup> In Meilicke's analysis of the work,<sup>20</sup> 'gnostic thinking' leads to a critical stance which must emphasize 'the temporariness and limitedness of all human understanding' whilst simultaneously enduring 'unresolved tensions and paradoxes.'<sup>21</sup>

Thomas as 'doubting' Thomas or as a kind of 'existential' Thomist against his will, so to speak,<sup>22</sup> is an explanatory and explorative attitude that has in effect reached the level of critical orthodoxy, although, of course, there are assorted variations upon the underlying theme. Marie-Thérèse Castay, for instance, has argued that 'an absent and/or malevolent God [...] has been at the heart of R.S.Thomas's poetry ever since *Pietà*,<sup>23</sup> an hypothesis also investigated in her earlier essay, 'The Self and the Other: the Autobiographical Element in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas'. In this latter paper, Castay asserts that both the poem 'Abercuawg' in *Frequencies* and the extraordinary lecture of the same name given at the National Eisteddfod in Cardigan in 1976, concentrate, 'on the way in which the ideal is always elusive and its materialisation always a betrayal of it [...] God is defined by His absence, for if He was present and accessible, eavesdropping behind the door, He would not be a transcendent, infinite Being, but a finite man-like one.'<sup>24</sup> According to Castay, 'the Deity occupies a vacuum and nothingness' and 'one can best speak of vertigo to describe man's state as he knows neither who he is nor who God is, and in that sense indeed, one can say that there is no truce with the furies since no real

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 416.

<sup>20</sup> Meilicke makes detailed reference to 'The Island', 'Cain' and 'Making' from *H'm*; 'The Hand', 'Rough' and 'Amen', from *Laboratories of the Spirit*, as well as 'The Gap' and 'Waiting' from *Frequencies* to bolster her thesis. She also quotes the renowned and extremely important comment from the Lethbridge interview, 'What I am tilting at is not God, but the idea of God,' arguing that this is an 'imaginative subversion' by Thomas, the point of which is to 'shock [...] readers and provoke them to distrust their own images of God.' Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 416.

<sup>22</sup> I am thinking in particular of Geoffrey Hill's rather puzzling assertion that 'whereas Thomas saw himself as an existential nationalist he was in fact closer to being a politicized aesthete,' in 'R.S.Thomas's Welsh Pastoral,' *Echoes to the Amen: Essays after R.S.Thomas*, ed. Damian Walford Davies (Cardiff: U. W. P., 2003), 51. Hill is discussing Thomas and Alun Lewis here and does not fully elucidate what he means, although he is presumably drawing a (pejorative?) distinction between Thomas's theological/ metaphysical leanings and the various tropes and figures he uses to isolate and expand those concerns.

<sup>23</sup>Marie-Thérèse Castay, 'No Truce with the Furies?', in *Agenda: A Tribute to R.S. Thomas*, 80.

<sup>24</sup>Printed in, *The Page's Drift: R.S. Thomas at Eighty*, ed. M.Wynn Thomas ( Bridgend: Seren Books, 1993), 127.

solution is offered to the existential problem'.<sup>25</sup> The projection of the *via negativa* is of course a central contention in much Thomas scholarship, and several bottles of academic ink have been consumed looking specifically at the motifs used by the poet to articulate his 'apophatic' approach to divinity.

Sam Perry, for example, has written convincingly on Thomas's use of the trope of the hand, suggesting that, 'God's communication, if it comes, will be non-verbal signs which are almost entirely dependent for their realisation upon individual intuition.'<sup>26</sup> For Perry, 'the sign of the hand brings together Thomas's related quests for knowledge of God, happiness in marriage and participation in community' and he further argues that Thomas's repeated use of the image, 'reflects the move he makes towards developing a theology of absence, based around the concept of the *via negativa*.'<sup>27</sup> Noting that the outstretched hand emblem has been conspicuous throughout Thomas's career (for example, 'No speech: the raised hand affirms/ All that is left unsaid,' from 'Peasant Greeting' in *The Stones of the Field*), Perry connects the figure with Thomas's apparent 'inability to conceive of God in human terms and the emphasis that his later poetry in particular places upon the extreme difficulty of coming into contact with the divine.'<sup>28</sup> Perry endeavours to galvanize his suggestion by arguing that, 'a loss of confidence in the power of language, especially in its capacity to deal with those imaginative and spiritual insights which he believed to be of primary importance, is one of the most distinctive features of the poetry Thomas produced during the last thirty years of his life.'<sup>29</sup> The hand emblem is important, according to Perry, because—similar to the famous 'untenanted cross' image—it is, 'a symbol that Thomas employs in an attempt to express and, to a certain extent, resolve the

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<sup>25</sup> 'No Truce with the Furies?', 80-82.

<sup>26</sup> Sam Perry, "'Hoping for the Reciprocal Touch": Intimations of the *Manus Dei* in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas', in *Literature and Theology*, vol.21, no.2 (June 2007), 179.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 180. Perry also alludes to 'hands that clasp or just fail to clasp' (*ibid.*,191) in Biblical, Tennysonian, Miltonic, and Eliotian imagery.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

problem of how to mediate the sense of a *Deus absconditus*, a hidden God, in language.<sup>30</sup>

Apophaticism is also accentuated by Anthony Conran, who, like Kari, contrasts Thomas's 'middle period' work with that of the 'completed' oeuvre of St. John of the Cross,<sup>31</sup> and, like Castay, regards *Pietà* as fundamental in the delineation of 'Thomasian' theology: 'Not until *Pietà*, in many ways the climactic volume of his struggle to find religious acceptance, to say "Amen", do we find much further evidence of the life of Contemplation.'<sup>32</sup> In Conran's reading, the central idea of the poetry at this point in Thomas's career is the nature and function

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 189. Perry further unites the image with what he terms the poet's 'related search for *human* connection,' (Perry's emphasis) referring expressly to Thomas' (complex) relationships with Margaret Thomas, his mother—'Yet I took her hand/ there and made a tight-rope/ of our fingers' (from *The Echoes Return Slow*)—and also his first wife Mildred, 'Elsi', Eldridge, e.g: 'Cold hands meeting,/ the eyes aside-/ so vows contracted/ in the tongue's absence.' (from *Residues*). See also Perry's comments on 'Remembering' (*No Truce with the Furies*), 'Countering' (*Experimenting with an Amen*) and 'Seventieth Birthday' (*Between Here and Now*). For detailed discussions of the autobiographical elements in Thomas's work, see: M. Wynn Thomas, "'Songs of Ignorance and Praise': R.S. Thomas's Poems about the Four People in his Life", in *Internal Difference: Twentieth Century Writing in Wales*, ed. M. Wynn Thomas (Cardiff: U. W. P., 1992), 130-155; Katie Gramich, 'Mirror Games: Self and M (O)ther in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas,' in *Echoes to the Amen*, 132- 148; Tony Brown, 'Eve's Ruse: Identity and Gender in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas,' *English* (Journal of the English Association), vol.49 (Autumn 2000), 229-250; Barbara Prys-Williams, *Twentieth-Century Autobiography: Writing Wales in English* (Cardiff:U. W. P., 2004), Chapter 6; Fflur Dafydd, "'There were fathoms in her too": R.S. Thomas and Women,' in *Renascence*, 118-131.

<sup>31</sup> Anthony Conran, *The Cost of Strangeness: Essays on the English Poets of Wales* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1982), 254-262. Conran also sees similarities between Thomas's output at this time and the work of Ted Hughes, and argues that the 'trickster' figure in *Crow* has affinities with what Conran views as Thomas's portrayal of an abhorrent and rancorous Diety: 'The growing point in *Not That He Brought Flowers* was neither the reflective pieces about his life and parishioners, nor the ironic or lyrical vignettes, but something a good deal more savage, a mythopoeia of suffering and creative malice, or something like it, that puts him on a par with the *Crow* poems of Ted Hughes.' Ibid., 249. For another analysis of the relationship between Thomas and Hughes, see Peter Abbs's (somewhat provocative) article, 'The Revival of the Mythopoeic Imagination- A Study of R.S. Thomas and Ted Hughes,' in *Critical Writings on R.S. Thomas*, ed. Sandra Anstey (Bridgend: Seren Books, 1992), 83-99. Tony Brown, in his book-length study of Thomas, makes the intriguing point that Thomas met Hughes at one of *Critical Quarterly's* summer schools in Bangor and London; see *R.S. Thomas, Writers of Wales* (Cardiff: U. W. P., 2006), 74 and 123. Although expressing admiration for Thomas's earlier work, Abbs detects what he terms 'poetic exhaustion' in *Not that He Brought Flowers* and writes that often in *H'm*, 'the actual words lack resonance, depth and intensity.' Ibid., 87-89. Other critics too have articulated reservations concerning Thomas's output after 1966 (*Pietà*), including Colin Falck and—perhaps surprisingly given his subsequent, enthusiastically expressed foreword to the Dent edition of *Collected Poems, 1945-1990*—the former Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion. See also J.D. Vicary, 'Absence and Presence in the Recent Poetry of R.S. Thomas', in *Miraculous Simplicity: Essays on R.S. Thomas*, ed. William V. Davis (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas press, 1993), 91. John Wain's critique of *H'm*, delivered within one of his lectures whilst Professor of Poetry at Oxford, is a sterling illustration of the opinion that, instead of 'sucking that orange dry' as Thomas himself put it ('An Interview with R. S. Thomas,' Gwyneth Lewis and Peter Robinson, *The Black and White Supplement*, March 1981) and moving as he did to more obviously 'metaphysical' themes, the poet had continued his inspection of the people and places of 1940s and 1950s rural Montgomeryshire: 'R.S. Thomas [...] is a particularly depressing example of the damage caused to a poet's work by the flight from form; his subject-matter has always been rather lowering (depopulation of the countryside, depopulation of the human heart through the decay of beliefs, etc.). But there was a time when the depressing nature of what Mr Thomas conveyed was irradiated and made bearable by his beautiful sense of rhythm and sound. The poems in *H'm* offer no such consolation.' Quoted in Donald Davie, *Under Brigflatts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 147.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 254. 'Contemplation' here is glossed by Conran as the life of Dobet in *Piers Ploughman*.

of the priesthood, and he refers approvingly to Roland Mathias's essay from ten years earlier, in which it is argued that Twm (from 'The Airy Tomb,') 'is *in league* with the stones of the field,'<sup>33</sup> whereas Thomas himself, like Elias Morgan in 'The Minister',

is locked in his own predicament, which may be partly a sectarian one. He preaches the rules from the Book and is not heard. Yet the people have a morality, or what passes for it: in the Nonconformist chapel of Maesyronnen, well away from his parish, the atmosphere can be dismissed as one of "stale piety": in the unspecified moorland parish of 'The Minister' the democratic practice of "calling" a new pastor becomes nature as debased by the farmer, the dominance of Job Davies and "the logic of Smithfield." There are rules which are generally understood, if frequently broken. It is the failure of the preacher's moral invective to redeem the rules that so irks the poet.<sup>34</sup>

Although this reading is more sociological than theological,<sup>35</sup> it does enable one to focus on the dichotomy which many critics have postulated to lie at the centre of Thomas's religious verse: how can man, a temporal being, even begin to understand the eternal nature of divinity?

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<sup>33</sup> Roland Mathias, 'Philosophy and Religion in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas,' in *Critical Writings on R.S. Thomas*, ed. Anstey, 66. Mathias's emphasis.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. Three years later, Thomas himself in a radio broadcast would unambiguously make the association: 'Well this (portrayal of Morgan) is probably a projection of myself rather than a true picture of the minister because Nonconformist ministers in Wales on the whole [...] are quite close to the people.' From, 'More Poetry at Large, 4', BBC Radio 3, 3 January 1975. Quoted in Tony Brown, "Glyn Jones and the 'Uncanny' ", *Almanac: A Yearbook of Welsh Writing in English*, ed. Katie Gramich, Vol. 12 (2007-8), 113.

<sup>35</sup> John Pikoulis in his short piece, 'The Minister,' in *Agenda: A Tribute to R.S. Thomas*, makes an analogous point, writing that Thomas was 'a poet *but* a priest,' (his emphasis) and also that Thomas was 'crippled by religious insecurity [...] the roots of Thomas's conflicts [...] lie in problems of an unresolvable kind.' 28-30. Elias Morgan (and to a limited extent Thomas), says Pikoulis, 'is trapped between two realities and fears the one that he senses is the truer one. As the Sartreans would have it, he lives in bad faith.' Ibid., 32.



Michael Tolkien has argued that for the 'later' Thomas, prayer itself 'articulates darkness as the distancing of the divine by the progress of material knowledge, sinister and minimal.'<sup>36</sup> This analysis is similar in its general tenor to Neil Corcoran's discussion of what is termed Thomas's 'post-holocaustal'<sup>37</sup> imaginative *mise-en-scene*; it is also comparable to John Barnie's reading of Thomas, which regards the nature poetry as explicative of a brutal and predominantly unmanageable post-Darwinian universe: 'it is harder for him [ Thomas ] to see its beauty in any simple sense as consolatory, as an affirmation of a benevolent deity.'<sup>38</sup> Thomas's God, insists Barnie, mirroring Hughes's God in *Crow*, is 'a robust, peevish, vengeful deity'<sup>39</sup> for, 'In a world where God is present only as an absence, it may be that he is absent in the more thoroughgoing sense of being nonexistent.'<sup>40</sup> Merging the autobiographical prose passages describing the splendour of nature and its evident callousness with the correspondingly articulated mythopoeic verses of the 1970s—what is glossed in both cases as 'the algorithmic processes of evolution by natural selection'<sup>41</sup>—Barnie regards Thomas's 'unspoken position' to be one of 'impasse' between the unimaginative 'flat-earthism,' as Gillian Clarke has called it, of atheism,<sup>42</sup> and the passion for, rather than reality of, religious consolation. Christianity, concludes Barnie, 'ironically fails to console, because the Christian religion has never been

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Tolkien, 'A Compulsion to Give Away Assurances': A Note on *The Echoes Return Slow* (1988) by R.S. Thomas, in *Agenda: A Tribute to R.S. Thomas*, 86.

<sup>37</sup> *English Poetry since 1940*, 76.

<sup>38</sup> John Barnie, 'Was R.S. Thomas an Atheist Manqué?', in *Echoes to the Amen*, 69.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 63. Barnie refers to *A Year in Llŷn* and the episodes where Thomas encounters the carcasses of two gulls killed by a peregrine falcon, 'The murderer has been round since I last visited Ty Mawr pool', and his seeing of a stoat later on in the same month: 'another beautiful killer.' (*Autobiographies*, 114 and 118). More importantly, Barnie also quotes the passage almost at the end of the text when Thomas, on the 31st of December, hears a sparrowhawk 'mewing in the wood at Ty'n Parc, as if sharpening its beak for the feast that will come its way in the new year,' (*Ibid.*, 170). Barnie reads Thomas's subsequent apologia for nature's inherent violence and amoral brutality as little more than a series of philosophically and biologically confused evasions: 'The non sequiturs in this passage are striking. Thomas first invokes the Argument from Design [...] only to retreat to the Old Testament and a twist of the Fall [...] And the statement that "the earth has kept the balance" is both true and not true: we are currently experiencing a human-induced mass extinction of species, as Thomas suggests, but the last five hundred and sixty million years are punctuated by at least five other extinction events. Like a lapwing feigning injury, the poet leads the reader further and further from his starting point- the question of what nature might suggest about its putative creator- as he tries, none too subtly, to extricate God from this uncomfortable equation.' Barnie, 64.

<sup>42</sup> 'The Power of Absence', interview with Deryn Rees Jones, *Planet*, 144 (2000), 57. Cited by Barnie, 72.

able to square itself with nature, and R.S. Thomas was too keen a thinker not to be aware of this.'<sup>43</sup>

The apophatic interpretation is also employed by Sabine Volk-Birke, who sees *Counterpoint* in particular as representative of the tussle 'between orthodoxy and rebellion, affirmation and negation, hope and despair'.<sup>44</sup> The octave of the opening poem, says Volk-Birke, 'documents the inability even of poetical language to find an objective correlative for that which precedes the beginning' and the concluding sestet, 'serves as a reminder that the poet, like the reader, is unable to transcend the known and the knowable explicitly; he is only able to point out the challenge.'<sup>45</sup> Like Dionysius Areopagita, Thomas is forced to accept that 'only negations can convey the nature of divinity'<sup>46</sup> and consequently, even within the 'AD' section of the volume, 'a teleological view of history is absent.'<sup>47</sup> Regarding the use of 'negative statements in order to express the ineffable' as a 'compromise which Thomas has been using for quite some time,'<sup>48</sup> Volk-Birke emphasizes 'the fundamental inadequacy of human language to develop any concept of God as he is by his very nature inaccessible to words' and reads the important ninth poem of 'AD' as commending 'silence of the human mind as the fittest receptacle for the encounter with God in *his* silence.'<sup>49</sup>

Silence and a concomitantly growing awareness of the inadequacy of language to 'express' God, predominantly from *Not That He Brought Flowers* onwards, are commented

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<sup>43</sup> Barnie, 74.

<sup>44</sup> Sabine Volk-Birke, 'World History from BC to AD: R.S. Thomas' *Counterpoint*,' in *Literature and Theology*, Vol.9, No.2 (June 1995), 200.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 208. Volk-Birke proffers the interesting conjecture that Thomas's use of the sonnet form in the volume, 'evokes the tradition of Dante's *Divina Comedia* and Shelley's *Triumph of Life*, two poems which also attempt a cosmic view of world order and history, one hopeful and one negative'. In addition, Volk-Birke views the choice of structure as alluding to both Donne and Hopkins: 'His attitude must also be seen in contrast to the personae in the "Holy Sonnets" and in the "terrible sonnets", both of whom accept the presence of God, even though they struggle with the spiritual hardship that is imposed on them.' Ibid., 204.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 216. This reading is similar to H.D. Lewis's somewhat hyperbolically expressed opinion that, 'The later poetry of R.S. Thomas is one long cry of dereliction. It is not just personal, the entire universe is involved. God seems to have made a universe that is doomed to wound him, God "holds his side", the "pierced side" suppurates in all things, the cry is everywhere'. 'The later poetry of R.S. Thomas,' in *Poetry Wales*, 14.4 (1979), 26.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 224. My emphasis.

upon by Barry Sloan, who sees in particular Thomas's problems with 'Welshness' prefiguring later, explicitly religious concerns:

his troubled relationship with Wales and the Welsh language, which is so evident in his work of the 1950s and 1960s, in some ways anticipates his attention thereafter to the universal problem of finding a sufficiently resourceful language to engage with the infinitely more troublesome matter of the relationship between the individual and God.<sup>50</sup>

Sloan's point is that geographical and societal estrangement, from as early as Thomas's time as a curate at Maelor Saesneg in Flintshire, promptly morphed, as it were, into 'similar awareness of the inscrutability of God'<sup>51</sup>. Sloan maintains that on the Ll^yn Peninsula especially, the poet's Yeatsian quarrel with himself began to concentrate on increasingly 'unconcealed', theological themes. Quoting the well-known passage describing the pre-Cambrian landscape of Braich y Pwll from *Neb*—'he realized he was in contact with something that had been there for a thousand million years. His head would spin. A timescale such as this raised all kinds of questions and problems'<sup>52</sup>—Sloan views the poetry of the final three decades of Thomas's life as seeming 'to turn on the paradox of skilfully and imaginatively employing words to articulate what they cannot do'.<sup>53</sup> In addition, referring to 'Waiting' from *Frequencies*, Sloan regards the penultimate line ('somewhere between faith and doubt') as, 'a summary statement of the ambivalence already noted in so much of Thomas's work, but it is faith that lies behind the metaphor of letting God's name go and waiting, just as Noah, a key Old Testament model of

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<sup>50</sup> Barry Sloan, ' "The Discipline of Watching and Waiting": R.S. Thomas, Poetry and Prayer', in *Religion and Literature*, 34.2 (Summer, 2002).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>52</sup> R.S. Thomas, *Autobiographies*, trans. Jason Walford Davies (London: Dent, 1997), 78.

<sup>53</sup> Sloan, 42.

faith, let the dove go out across the flooded world and waited to see if it would return.<sup>54</sup>

Tony Brown interprets Thomas's early 'Romantic idealism' as rapidly giving way to a 'gradual loss of confidence in the power of language itself, especially in its capacity to deal with those insights and values which he holds to be of the most central importance.'<sup>55</sup> In Brown's analysis of the oeuvre, the palpable, lingering Wordsworthianism of *The Stones of the Field* and *Song at the Year's Turning* especially, adjusts itself, with the move in 1967 to Aberdaron, to encompass 'a more universal significance, now the whole of human existence since the Creation becomes his subject.'<sup>56</sup> Within this thematic adjustment, continues Brown, there is a lamentation by Thomas for the loss of, as he puts it in 'Postscript' (*H'm*, 22), 'deciduous language':

The music is not that of the bard but of the conveyer belt. Mouths open not to communicate but to consume. Language is all but dead [...] This threatened humanity is represented by the gift which separates it from both beasts and machinery, the ability to articulate its feelings in words, to give voice to its imaginative life in poetry [...] But the modern society which Thomas portrays in his later work is a society which ignores any call for redemption.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid. This emphasis on 'silent hope' as the best that faith can offer, seems to disregard Thomas's explicitly 'positive' connection of the Noah myth to the confidence the writer *must* entertain if anything at all worthy of his endeavours is to be achieved, as stated in 'Vocabulary', *Residues*, (although I am assuming that when Sloan wrote his paper *Residues* had not yet been published): 'A new Noah, I despatch// you to alight awhile/ on steel braches, then call/ you home, looking for the metallic/ gleam of a new poem in your bill.' Alternatively, there is the poem beginning 'At the grave's head' in *The Echoes Return Slow* (43), which concludes: 'wings// of a dove daily/ returning from its journey/ over the dark waters/ with green in its bill.' Either way, Sloan's insistence on the poet's 'radical scepticism towards traditional theological beliefs about the nature of God and of the adequacy of language to mediate the relationship between humans and God,' (Ibid., 46) is an exceptionally significant idea in much Thomas scholarship.

<sup>55</sup> Tony Brown, 'Language, Poetry and Silence: Some Themes in the Poetry of R.S. Thomas,' in *The Welsh Connection*, ed. W. M. Tydeman (Llandysul: Gomer P., 1987), 159.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 170. Continuing his emphasis on the poetry as 'the use of human language in its search for that reality'—as Thomas himself put it in the John Ormond interview, 'R.S. Thomas: Priest and Poet', *Poetry Wales*, 7, no.4 (1972) 54)—Brown also notes in this passage the preponderance of tree imagery in the work from *An Acre of Land* onward. Brown connects this imagery to the uncollected 'Symbols' (*Poetry Wales*, 5, no.2 (1969), 36), where Bishop William Morgan, translator of the Bible into Welsh, is described as 'shaking/ The words from the

With specific reference to George Steiner's analysis of Medieval to Symbolist verse in 'Silence and the Poet', Brown argues that thematically embedded in the later poetry is 'the paradoxical position of writing poems, verbal structures, about the very limitations of language itself'.<sup>58</sup> Brown also maintains, alluding to the Lethbridge interview in which the poet lays emphasis on the connotative as opposed to denotative character of all language, that Thomas believes the creative artist must exist within metaphysical/ linguistic isolation—the poet, says Brown, 'does not feel himself enfolded by God, but alone, mouthing words into an empty silence.'<sup>59</sup>

For Sloan and Brown, Thomas is primarily a poet of the 'God of the gaps',<sup>60</sup> and D.Z. Phillips, another notable critic who has written at length on Thomas's religious verse, also posits a theodicy of 'the struggle of mediating a sense of a *Deus absconditus*, a hidden God, in language.'<sup>61</sup> Phillips, a renowned philosopher of religion, is particularly interested in what he terms Thomas's despondency 'over the impotence of his [theological] language,'<sup>62</sup> and (in an adaptation of Conran's assessment) identifies this particularly religious concern as manifest

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great tree of/ Language.' Bishop Morgan also appears in 'Llanrhaeadr ym Mochnant' (*Not that He Brought Flowers*) which contains the well-known lines: 'There is no portrait of him/ But in the gallery of the imagination: a brow/ With the hair's feathers/ Spilled on it? a cheek/ Too hollow? rows of teeth/ Broken on the unmanageable bone/ Of language?' and in 'R.I.P 1588-1988' (*Mass for Hard Times*).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 173. Brown is referring to *Laboratories of the Spirit and Frequencies*.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 175. We know that Thomas was extremely familiar with Steiner (for an overview of his reading, see William V. Davis, *R.S. Thomas: Poetry and Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 172, n.18.) and Thomas's copies of *Real Presences* and *Language and Silence*, with slight annotations in his own hand, are held at The R.S. Thomas Study Centre at Bangor University. These annotations, although cryptically brief like all Thomas's annotations appear to have been, show that Thomas was certainly aware of contemporary issues in epistemology, metaphysics, social anthropology, linguistics and even Derridean deconstruction. Brown also makes the valuable point that Thomas's later preoccupation with specifically scientific epistemology did not advance his theological comprehension; although he 'has modernised the "anachronism" of his language' (*The Absence*, *Frequencies*, 48), all the jargon of "genes" and "molecules", "lenses" and "equations", has not brought him any closer to God. The only reply is a vast and ambiguous silence,' *ibid.*, 176. This hypothesis is also advanced by John Barnie in his review of *Later Poems, 1972-1982*, who, after observing that Thomas is 'one of the few poets [...] to come to terms with the discoveries and terminology of science,' concludes with the assertion that, 'Language, man's habitual tool in this reaching towards God's identity, always falls short.' *Poetry Wales*, vol. 18, no.4 (1985), 91-92.

<sup>60</sup>The expression is Thomas's, from 'Probings: An Interview with R.S. Thomas,' Ned Thomas and John Barnie, *Planet*, 80 (April/ May 1990), 45. Importantly, however, Thomas appends the following restriction to his own metaphor: 'this does not mean that each closure of a gap is a kind of erosion of the reality of God. There is the God of Ann Griffiths and Mother Theresa as well as of Augustine and Pascal [...] I do contemplate or visualise or experience God as other than the last frontier waiting to be crossed.' *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> D. Z. Phillips, *R. S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 1986), xv.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

also in the poet's thoughts vis-à-vis his ministerial obligations. Thomas as priest cannot offer succour to the dying Evans ('Evans', *PS*, 15), nor congratulate the ninety-year-old woman on her birthday ('Ninetieth Birthday', *PS*, 21), and even his request for exculpation to Prytherch is ultimately and depressingly worthless. All the poet can do, argues Phillips, is forlornly tender 'songs which can do no more than express the failure of his own language.'<sup>63</sup> Thomas, in Phillips's reading, is therefore a tabulator of modernity's devaluation of all forms of meaningful linguistic currency. The poet, says Phillips, 'is torn apart, neither able to let his desire for God go, nor also to close his ears to questions which threaten to hide the very possibility of God from him'.<sup>64</sup> Although Phillips recognizes the fundamental discrepancy between regarding 'human language [as] inherently inadequate to capture the nature of an infinite God' and the more ontological verdict that 'God is hidden only in the contingent sense that, given our position, we cannot comprehend him,'<sup>65</sup> Phillips maintains that Thomas, 'Like Baudelaire [...] sees poetry as the effort to turn base metal into gold.'<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 40.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 114.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 115. In the context of this discussion, Phillips comments disapprovingly on W. Moelwyn Merchant's opinion that in *Frequencies* 'The topic explored is nothing less than 'The Gap' between God and our articulations of his being' (W. Moelwyn Merchant, *R.S. Thomas, Writers of Wales* (Cardiff: U. W. P., 1979), 97) saying that Moelwyn Merchant fails to appreciate the 'question of the grammatical (in the sense of logical) status' of the language confronting 'philosopher and poet alike.' Ibid., 120, Phillips's parenthesis. It seems to me that Phillips has done Moelwyn Merchant a disservice here, for Moelwyn Merchant clearly states that 'Thomasian' theology from *The Way of It to Frequencies*, 'begins to be concerned with language and the articulation of the impossible' and that in *Frequencies*, 'Philosophy can provide [Thomas] with few definitions and indeed in one poem, 'Synopsis', he eschews the intellectual modes of all philosophers from Plato to Kierkegaard [...] In this absence of a known territory he must now trust himself, poised over *an immense depth*, to waiting, *somewhere between faith and doubt*.' W. Moelwyn Merchant, 97-98. Emphases in original. Unless I am disregarding subtleties in Phillips's analysis, this appears comparable to his own view that: 'The silences ask for the religious response which the poet has been able to make earlier in his verse. But that response seems to have become problematic. To perform it seems to involve a conjuring-trick, a sleight-of-hand, which the mind rejects. This is not the intellectual and moral rejection of the God of theodicies. Rather, it is asking a hidden God whether belief in him forces us to ignore too much.' Phillips, 165. In the interests of balance, however, it must be noted that seven years later, Phillips (although without reference to Moelwyn Merchant), somewhat retracted these remarks: 'When I wrote an essay on Thomas called 'Seeking the Poem in the Pain' in a collection on philosophy and literature, I had concluded that he achieved no satisfactory religious syntax in verse. That is because, like most people who read Thomas, the immediate impression made on you is by the negative poems: the poems that show God as a monster, and the poems that celebrate the endurance of Iago Prytherch, and so on. What I now think is that he is one of the very few poets indeed in the twentieth century, who has succeeded in speaking directly about religion in verse in such a way as to make a mediation of religious sense in our time possible.' Transcript from 'R.S. Thomas at Seventy,' broadcast on BBC Radio 3, 7 December, 1983 and printed in, M.J.J. van Buuren, *Waiting: The Religious Poetry of Ronald Stuart Thomas, Welsh Priest and Poet* (Nijmegen: Katholieke Universiteit van Nijmegen, 1993), 177.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 169.

The linguistic ramifications of Thomas's perceived onto-theology are also commented upon in an extremely important paper by M. Wynn Thomas, who argues in ' "The Fantastic Side of God": R.S. Thomas and Jorge Luis Borges', that Thomas, like Borges, wrote 'partly in the guise of a latter-day Gnostic or Rabbinical Cabalist, turning away from orthodoxy to engage with the riddle of a universe whose nature was, he realised, grotesquely incompatible with the neat platitudes of conventional religious belief'.<sup>67</sup> Thomas's religious poetry, therefore, is 'the self-confessing language of liminality'.<sup>68</sup> In Wynn Thomas's view, the poet's career may be seen as a prolonged variation upon Eliot's 'raid on the inarticulate'. God is a 'baffling plurality of contradictions' and, in *H'm* especially, Thomas's references to 'God' and 'the God,' are suggestive 'not only of the plural form of the Hebrew Elohim but also of the Gnostic belief in a multiplicity of divinities',<sup>69</sup> with the poet's 'baffled theology' further mirrored by 'the movingly baffled syntax of his poetry'.<sup>70</sup> In answer to the question 'What language/ does the god speak?' ('The Film of God,' *F*, 47), Thomas's rhetoric, continues Wynn Thomas, provides commanding evidence of its own negation. The mad creators of Borges's Library of Babel find a counterpart in Thomas's 'futile but incessant human attempt to confine God within the definitions of language' leading Wynn Thomas to argue that, for the poet, linguistic duplicity is 'the best human response to the literal inscrutability of Christ's personal scripture, his sandy signature: "He was content, remembering/ the unseen writing of Christ/ on the ground, to interpret/ it in his own way." '<sup>71</sup> The 'true fast' here, is 'abstention from language' ('Incarnations', *NTF*, 39) and, in consequence, 'Thomas writes poems that are self-confessedly doomed to be swallowed up by a silence as instantly as Christ's cipher was erased by the sand'<sup>72</sup> with the ekphrastic poems of *Between Here and Now* and *Ingrowing Thoughts* in particular, generating

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<sup>67</sup>*Renascence*, 180.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, 183. The quotation is from 'Code' (*Between Here and Now*).

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 184.

their argumentative energy from the 'paradoxical capacity to convey that which was absent.'<sup>73</sup>

## 1.2 'Kindling/ A New Truth:' Critical Perceptions Towards a Theodicy of Hope

In the end R. S. Thomas is a poet who must stand or fall by his capacity to express the inexpressible, to say something about man's relationship to ultimate things, to God himself.<sup>74</sup>

What we *know* is that things come into our lives sometimes which are so immeasurably better than the things of every day, that it *seems* as though they were sent from another world, and could not come out of ourselves [...] What the vision seems to show me is that we can live in a deeper region than the region of little every-day cares and desires— where beauty is a revelation of something beyond [...] where Self as a separate fighting unit fades away, and where all common tasks are easy because they are seen as parts of what is greatest.<sup>75</sup>

In recent years especially, much valuable work has been done in regard to the matter of Thomas

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 187. Wynn Thomas also comments on Thomas's use of mirror imagery and the manner in which the trope of the pool is often cognate to the mirror, seeing these figures as suggesting 'self-alienation, of being lost in the labyrinth of his [Thomas's] own being'. Wynn Thomas also says that, for Thomas, there is 'never any getting beyond that paradox— that the self can never become objective to itself and so can never become the "subject" of self-understanding.' Ibid., 191. Cf. Volk-Birke, 'World History from BC to AD: R. S. Thomas' *Counterpoint*,' 206: 'As in the first sonnet, here also [the fifth poem] the sestet only provides a fresh problem, not an answer to the dilemma raised in the octet. It implies that a mirror is a useless instrument for anybody who wishes to examine himself closely, because, as happened to the Holy Spirit in the octet, one's breath clouds the glass and thus prevents vision. Are mirrors therefore bent on preserving themselves inviolate, unknown and unknowable, like virgins? Is this then the answer to the initial question? If so, then God deliberately refuses access to man in any conceivable way, be it homage, prayer, or supplication'.

<sup>74</sup> A. M. Allchin, 'R. S. Thomas: *Experimenting with an Amen*', in *Poetry Wales*, 22: 1 (1986), 81.

<sup>75</sup> Bertrand Russell, letter to Ottoline Morrell, 3 January, 1912, in *The Selected Letters of Bertrand Russell*, vol. 1: 'The Private Years, 1884-1914', ed. Nicholas Griffin (London: The Penguin Press, 1992), 413-14. Emphases in original.



as 'secular mystic'. William V. Davis has written at length on the poet as a direct inheritor of Matthew Arnold's 'quintessential agnosticism' or, more pronouncedly, Shavian 'religiousness without religion.'<sup>76</sup> Quoting Arnold's *Literature and Dogma*— 'in truth, the word 'God' is used in most cases as [...] a term of poetry and eloquence, a term thrown out, so to speak, at a not fully grasped object of the speaker's consciousness, a literary term in short'<sup>77</sup>—Davis regards the Arnoldian 'Sea of Faith' as beginning to flow again in what he terms Thomas's 'apocalyptic mode'. Nevertheless, Davis affixes the heavy qualification that 'Thomas, again and again, presents us with one man, alone, lonely for and before God, calling across the gapped void between them, hoping beyond hope that, somehow, God will hear his "verbal hunger" and be moved— if not to respond, at least to listen.'<sup>78</sup> In this sense, Davis contends, the theology of Arnold and Thomas run on approximately parallel lines without ever directly converging. Arnold adjudges religion to exist purely as 'shadows and dreams and false shows of knowledge',<sup>79</sup> whereas for Thomas (and with an obvious reference to St. John of the Cross), 'there comes a time, at the end of a dark night, when light begins to flicker if not fully flame'.<sup>80</sup> In support of this view, and with specific attention to those poems displaying what is identified as 'the inevitable chiaroscuro of the apocalyptic mode,'<sup>81</sup> Davis sees the symbolism of the Cross as 'suggesting simultaneously the cross of Christ and a point of intersection or exchange from one state to another.'<sup>82</sup> Davis thus concurs with A.E. Dyson's quasi-Nietzschean pronouncement that Thomas persistently draws upon,

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<sup>76</sup>Davis, 3.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 4.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 90. The phrase 'verbal hunger' is from 'The Gap', the opening poem of *Frequencies*. By 'apocalyptic mode,' Davis means 'the habit of finding absences mysteriously filled with presences,' (ibid., 69) and sees this thematic fixation also in the work of Yeats, Wallace Stevens, Dylan Thomas, John Berryman, and, in particular, Roethke. See, 60-61.

<sup>79</sup>From Arnold's 'The Study of Poetry' and quoted by Davis, 2.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 63. Davis is especially interested here in the Christology of 'Amen' (*Laboratories of the Spirit*), 'Shadows' and 'Epiphany' (both *Frequencies*), where, he says, the Cross has become Thomas's 'obsessive symbol for the complexities and doubts which modern man faces.' Ibid., 64.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 64.

the image of evolved man, alone in a creation where God is dead [...] in exact silhouette against the other image of Christ on the Cross, when God is absent. If the Christian religion has this paradox at its heart, perhaps it is not irrelevant to modern doubt after all, but simply an anticipation of it by 2000 years.<sup>83</sup>

Dyson's influential critique has been cited by several scholars and revolves on the modernist or, more accurately, postmodernist contention, that 'We cannot evade the findings of Darwin, Freud and Einstein, and their questions, we cannot evade the failure of discursive reason, and dogma, to satisfy the religious need [...] Thomas is not a poet of the transfiguration, of the resurrection, of human holiness [...] he is a poet of the Cross, the unanswered prayer.'<sup>84</sup> Having negotiated the preliminary theological ground, Dyson then moves into a subtle reading of several poems from the 1970s and maintains that Thomas 'sets up echoes between his poems, as Yeats did, mutually enriching and elusive'<sup>85</sup>—meaning, for example, that Yeats counterpoints 'Sailing to Byzantium' with 'The Tower', and 'Lapis Lazuli' with 'The Circus Animals' Desertion'—and fortifies this analysis with the important but curiously often overlooked point that, 'Clearly, any single poem is not the last word: and, if it were, the others would be impoverished rather than enriched.'<sup>86</sup> That is well said, and Dyson is at pains to continually underscore what he calls the 'ambiguous balance' between 'the heart' and 'the mind'<sup>87</sup> repeatedly detectable in Thomas's work as much as in Yeats's and Eliot's. He notes further that even while the habitual assertions of God's absence 'seem as lucid as Wallace

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<sup>83</sup>A.E. Dyson, *Yeats, Eliot and R.S. Thomas: Riding the Echo* (London: Macmillan, 1981), 304. Quoted by Davis, 64. Dyson is commenting specifically on 'Here' from *Tares*.

<sup>84</sup>Dyson, 295-296.

<sup>85</sup>Dyson, 306.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, 314.

<sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*, 320.

Stevens's, though far angrier, there is a parallel possibility [...] of converse truth.'<sup>88</sup> In Dyson's interpretation of Thomas's theology, we must conclude that Thomas accentuates the primacy of experience—rather than 'theory'—in religious speculation. The poet, says Dyson, gives us something akin to:

the more Pauline and Christian [world view], which is that things that are good, true, pure, lovely *tend* to work for good, if one chooses to be open to their influence and celebrate them, but that the choice whether to accept, or reject, the influence remains open. The mystery of good and evil is, after all, central; and in Thomas it is all the more impressive for not being identified with partly faked or superficial dilemmas such as pre-modern versus modern, civilised versus uncivilised, or even urban versus rural, but rather found in the inner tensions of the people he knows best.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup>Ibid., 323.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., 297. Dyson's emphasis. I find this argument by Dyson entirely credible and read it as offering a vigorous riposte to the consistently levelled charge that, as the years progressed, Thomas supplanted naive bucolic idealism with a form of epistemic scepticism, and a scepticism, moreover, which ultimately became the culmination of his creative life's work. Patrick Deane, for instance, writes that 'the pessimism of *H'm* grows out of a dismissal or at least reevaluation of past ideas, of an earlier belief in the possibilities for communion with God in a life lived on the land and close to its simplest inhabitants' (" 'The Unmanageable Bone: Language in R.S. Thomas's Poetry,' in *Miraculous Simplicity*, 206). Randal Jenkins—commenting on the article 'The Depopulation of the Welsh Hill Country', published by Thomas one year before *The Stones of the Field* in the summer edition of Keidrych Rhys's *Wales*—depicts the much-observed contrast between the Palgrave-tinted expectations of the embryonic poet and the uncompromising reality of Manafon thus: 'The romantic and intellectual priest who had spent his early life in the anglicised and suburban fringes of Wales and who was committed to a belief in the human and spiritual values of a life close to nature, and powerfully attracted by the ancient language and culture of his people and to the developing movement to stir their national consciousness, must have taken up his living in that isolated mountainous region with expectation of finding there much of the old community of the *cefn gwlad*. Of course he was disappointed; depopulation and anglicisation in this part of Montgomeryshire had made deep incursions into "the old heart of Wales."' ('R.S. Thomas: Occasional Prose,' in *Critical Writings on R.S. Thomas*, 49.) Although it is undeniably the case that the youthful vicar's dreams of pastorally-inspired aestheticism were probably shattered for ever as a result of the (entertainingly) disastrous pilgrimage to Fiona Macleod's Hebrides, one can often read more into this than is necessary and assign to Thomas a degree of dewy-eyed ingenuousness which was probably never there. For example, we know from his replies to the *Wales* questionnaire in 1946 that he wished to emulate Yeats and write for: 'my own race/ And the *reality*' (VI: 3, 23, my emphasis) and his reading of MacDiarmid showed him that contemporary Scottish nationalism had absolutely no connections whatsoever with

Tim McKenzie, in his study of Herbert, Hopkins and Thomas, discovers in Thomas the post-Yeatsian assignment to directly confront 'the agitated centre that cannot hold'<sup>90</sup> and regards the mythopoeic verses in particular as working 'tirelessly to satirise sterile or overly rationalist *ideas* of God.'<sup>91</sup> Agreeing with Rowan Williams's argument that theological veracities 'must not be said, they must occur, they must surprise and overtake,'<sup>92</sup> McKenzie argues that the Christological poems 'at their best [...] hold together the suffering of humanity, the terror of the cross and wild belief in the resurrection'<sup>93</sup> and that, at variance to Herbert's Christ of 'onely musick' and Hopkins's Christ of 'Heraclitean Fire', Thomas's darkly anthropomorphized Christ, if He comes at all, 'is too mysterious to be Thomas's friend.'<sup>94</sup> Quoting the passage from the Ormond interview in which Thomas notoriously described Christianity as 'the presentation of imaginative truth', McKenzie concludes that Thomas 'appears agnostic, finally, about the details of the connection between Jesus and God,'<sup>95</sup> and that, in continuation of this, the following words from 'The Moon in Lleyn' (*LS*, 30-1) and 'One Life' (*MHT*, 28) must be interpreted *non-figuratively*: 'Religion is over' and the 'baffling disorder of the cross'<sup>96</sup> necessitates that 'Literature is on the way out.'<sup>97</sup>

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the fictions of Walter Scott or the parallel fiction of 'Balmorality'.

<sup>90</sup>Tim McKenzie, *Vocation in the Poetry of the Priest-Poets George Herbert, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and R. S. Thomas* (Studies in Art and Religious Interpretation, Vol.34; Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 36.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*, 38. McKenzie's emphasis. As McKenzie remarks, 37, n. 70, other expressions employed to illustrate Thomas's use of creation narratives are Elaine Shepherd's 'Mythic Poems' (*R.S. Thomas: Conceding an Absence. Images of God Explored* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 89), J.P Ward's 'mythic narratives' (*The Poetry of R.S. Thomas*, rev. edn. (Bridgend: Seren, 2001), 91) and Julian Gitzen's 'miniature fables' (R.S. Thomas and the Vanishing God of Form and Number,' in *Miraculous Simplicity*, 173). To these we could also add Rowan Williams's 'Guilty Creator model' (" 'Adult Geometry': Dangerous Thoughts in R.S. Thomas," in *The Page's Drift*, 88), Dennis Brown's 'fabulist variations on Christian narrative themes' (in *The David Jones Journal*, 130), and Peter Abbs's 'radical mythology' (in *Critical Writings on R.S. Thomas*, 88).

<sup>92</sup>'Adult Geometry', 97.

<sup>93</sup>McKenzie, 223.

<sup>94</sup>*Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>95</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup>*Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>97</sup> It is interesting to note that McKenzie has actually misquoted here, for he omits the line-break succeeding 'way' and as such transforms what is in effect an interrogation concerning the validity of creative art—the enjambement forcing us to consider the tenor of the metaphor in a more reflective fashion than an end-stopped line would allow—into an emphatic statement of literature's supposed redundancy.

Surrounding the precincts of agnosticism, however, McKenzie distinguishes in Thomas a supplication to turn away from a reductionist age. Thomas, says McKenzie, ultimately proclaims that 'quietness, stillness and love can lead to wholeness', for these are 'the priest-poet's prophetic recipe for overcoming the spiralling catastrophe of contemporary life.'<sup>98</sup> Some of the later poems, says McKenzie, employ the hieratic function of offering human affliction to God,<sup>99</sup> whilst others turn on the premise that the truths of Christian narrative may only be fully appropriated within the framework offered by sacramental theology, and it is the symbolism embedded in these poems that McKenzie identifies as proffering some means for 'glimpsing the transcendent.'<sup>100</sup> In this sense, McKenzie argues, much of the poetry itself may be conceived of in sacramental terms, for with the fusion of 'Paradox, ambiguity and synaesthesia' often discernable in the collections of the 1970s onward—what Williams in a similar context called their 'reversals, metaphoric jolts, aphoristic closures'<sup>101</sup>—Thomas is able to present the 'break-down' of language as indicative of *requested*, as opposed to specifically delivered, spiritual release:

Thomas' poems may extend their sacramental role by achieving the condition of absolution [...] As the language approaches this experience, it stumbles before God's ultimate reality, yet in reaching beyond itself, proves strangely adequate [...] As language displays its inability to convey the absolution it promises, its break-down nevertheless intimates the desired transcendence.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup>Ibid., 178.

<sup>99</sup>For example: 'Waiting' (*Frequencies*); 'The New Mariner' (*Between Here and Now*); 'Praise' (*The Way of It*); 'Suddenly' (*Later Poems*). For a discussion of these and other poems, see McKenzie, 121-137.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 179.

<sup>101</sup>'Adult geometry,' 94.

<sup>102</sup>McKenzie, 179. This is in direct opposition to Geoffrey Hill who states unequivocally that Thomas is a poet of 'sacramental nihilism.' See 'R.S. Thomas's Welsh Pastoral,' 48.

Another important study connecting the work of Herbert and Thomas is by William J. McGill who, unlike Phillips, considers Thomas as fully submerged within 'the deep stream of the Welsh bardic tradition in which the tasks of the poet and of the priest seem closely allied.'<sup>103</sup> Beginning his critique with an examination of the role of 'calling' in both poets, McGill regards the initial point of divergence between the two poets to lie within the rubric of post-Enlightenment biblical criticism; Herbert—unsurprisingly given his historical position—fully accepts Article VI of the Articles of Religion, whereas Thomas's more inexplicit and theologically discursive oeuvre, 'is a series of impressionistic images of a pilgrim in a strange land, a land where the sense of God's absence, of man's loneliness, of the necessity of waiting, is pervasive.'<sup>104</sup> Thomas at Manafon is not Herbert at Bemerton, and, despite the declamatory muscle of the latter's representation of vocational uncertainty in 'The Collar' ('Is the year only lost to me?/ Have I no bays to crown it?/ No flowers, no garlands gay? all blasted?/ All wasted?') we can never impute to him the same measure of 'equivocation' we recurrently do to the former.<sup>105</sup> For Herbert, the freshness of the Authorized Version enabled fluid transition from its words to consideration of the Living Word, whereas for Thomas, in McGill's opinion, only disappointment will result from attempting to force Christ 'Between the boards of a black book' ('A Welsh Testament', *T*, 39). For the twentieth century poet: 'the distinction between the Book, this document of human language, and the Word, the divine truth that we struggle to articulate, made such movement difficult, if not impossible.'<sup>106</sup>

Such is the general inclination of McGill's analysis, although he often tenaciously undercuts his own reading by noting that Thomas's anti-'reductionist solution' ('Bleak Liturgies,' *MHT*, 41-3) to the dilemma of how to live within the linguistic as well as

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<sup>103</sup>William J. McGill, *Poet's Meeting: George Herbert, R.S. Thomas, and the Argument with God* (North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc.: 2004), 33.

<sup>104</sup>*Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>105</sup> *George Herbert: A Selection of his Finest Poems*, ed. Louis L. Martz (Oxford: O. U. P., 1994), 134.

<sup>106</sup>*Ibid.*, 57.

epistemological confines of (post) modernity,<sup>107</sup> operates on a more subtle and concentrated level than is usually appreciated. C.S. Lewis remarked that: ‘The very essence of our life as conscious beings, all day and every day, consists of something which cannot be communicated except by hints, similes, metaphors, and the use of those emotions (themselves not very important) which are pointers to it’.<sup>108</sup> According to McGill, Thomas similarly maintains that metaphor, although not faultless in conveying what Herbert called ‘The soul in paraphrase’ (‘Prayer I’), constructs at least one channel through which we may accept, if not wholly comprehend, the capriciousness of the Deity:

It would be easy enough to dismiss these words (of ‘Bleak Liturgies’) as the waspish pliant of a traditionalist clinging to the old language, but a full reading of Thomas suggests far more. They are also the words of a poet who profoundly understood the nature and value of metaphorical language— and of a Christian who believed that the dark hard rocks of the faith can only be expressed in metaphors. And metaphor speaks to our understanding suggestively, impressionistically, never definitively. Thus our understanding remains imperfect. If we in our contemporary wisdom (or is it arrogance?) decry the “reductionist solution” of the past, can we really believe that our own flight from metaphor, the conviction that we can precisely state religious truths in “furniture department” language, is not also reductionist? Does our “fraction of the language” really lead us anywhere in our journey of faith?<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup>In support of his thesis, McGill quotes Thomas’s introduction to *A Choice of George Herbert’s Verse* where he testifies that Herbert, ‘demonstrates both the possibility and the desirability of a friendship with God. Friendship is no longer the right way to describe it. The word now is dialogue, encounter, confrontation, but the realities have not altered all that much.’ *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>108</sup>C.S. Lewis, ‘The Language of Religion,’ in *Christian Reflections*, quoted by McGill, 62.

<sup>109</sup>McGill., 68.

Thus, although Thomas can obviously never be interpreted as a believer in Herbert's 'easie quick accesse' ('Prayer II') to the world of divine transcendence,<sup>110</sup> answers nevertheless do come in the form of 'sounds, in images, in some ineffable sense, in the persistence of questions that will not go away'.<sup>111</sup> For this compelling reason alone, argues McGill, the judicious critic of Thomas cannot progress *mutatis mutandis* from the apparent silence of God to a presumption of God's nonexistence. Both crib and cross may often be portrayed as empty but that does not result in any form of the various theological heterodoxies often attributed to the poet; as McGill adroitly pronounces, the poems from *Not That He Brought Flowers* onwards are 'religious' rather than formally 'doctrinal' and consequently they must be read as, 'attempts to describe metaphorically our experience with realities, including spiritual experience. And metaphor is always approximate.'<sup>112</sup> For McGill, therefore, the straw in the crib is still warm even though the Infant may not be there and the unoccupied Cross continues to cast a silhouette powerful enough for Thomas to witness and, like the anguished father in Mark 9: 24 proclaim: 'Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief.'

Elaine Shepherd sees the theology of the poems as in a state of unremitting fluctuation between the *via negativa* and the *via positiva*. Thomas, for example, will contrast the obvious Christian symbology of Monet's 'Rouen Cathedral' with the apparent secularism of Gauguin's 'The Alysamps at Arles' (*Between Here and Now*) yet emphasize in both paintings: 'the idea that art is a sacrament, that is, it is capable of mediating God [...] and also the possibility that the present age is a post-Christian age, and, therefore, that in the absence of any call to worship,

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<sup>110</sup>McGill of course recognizes that Herbert often concedes the pivotal difference between the stipulations of belief and the reality of human life, and that the 'hard moments—of sorrow, of doubt, of suffering God's silence, even absence—are integral to a life of faith.' *Ibid.*, 95. For an interesting discussion on the nature of 'reluctant' faith in Herbert, see Ceri Sullivan, *The Rhetoric of the Conscience in Donne, Herbert and Vaughan* (Oxford: O. U. P., 2008), esp. Chapter 5 which emphasizes the role *aposiopesis* performs in poems such as 'Time', 'Employment II', 'Affliction I', 'Longing', as well as several others.

<sup>111</sup>*Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>112</sup>*Ibid.*, 168. A similar point is made by McKenzie, 122-123, who sees the poetry's resistance to 'final doctrinal statement' as more Arnoldian than Hopkinsesque.



Art is the only sacrament available to the present generation.'<sup>113</sup> Ignoring Germain Bazin's biographical and interpretative comments in his *Impressionist Paintings in the Louvre* (Bazin tells us that 'Light was all that interested Monet'<sup>114</sup> and also that the building in the background of Gauguin's canvas is the ruins of the church of St-Honorat), Thomas, says Shepherd, 'is going to impose his own religious reading'<sup>115</sup> on the pictures. Therefore, maintains Shepherd, an intertextually-generated complicity is established between poet and audience which is in turn suggestive of hermeneutical pluralism:

For the viewer or reader, the angelus is silenced not only by the intervening years, [meaning between the impressionists and now] but also by the increasing secularism of our time [...] Thomas associates brush-strokes with the secondary imagination, the echo of God; the canvas itself, literally the 'stuff' of art, becomes the 'airier belfries' replacing those of the church [...] Drawing on the experience we have now gained we may expect to find multiple readings of a single image between which the reader is required to arbitrate. We shall anticipate sliding perspectives, and we will not be able to limit our reading to those poems which are conventionally religious.<sup>116</sup>

Shepherd identifies this form of 'multi-voicedness' as the unifying tissue throughout Thomas's work. The landscape, scientific and 'mythic' poems also propose 'a series of connected incidents which are, in the main, open-ended' and the reader is constantly confronted 'by statements which swiftly undercut their expectations; by inconsistencies in the voices, and

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<sup>113</sup>Elaine Shepherd, *R.S. Thomas: Conceding an Absence*, 46-47.

<sup>114</sup>Quoted in Shepherd, 42.

<sup>115</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>116</sup>*Ibid.*, 48.

perhaps more than anything else by the denial of an authoritative narrating voice.<sup>117</sup> Closure is persistently denied—'the *via positiva*,' Shepherd tells us, 'is an essential complement to the *via negativa*, and without it the *via negativa* cannot express its intuited knowledge'<sup>118</sup>—and, by drawing attention to his verses as paradigms of linguistic instability and therefore theological indeterminacy, Thomas is able to accentuate what Shepherd regards as his two most salient, mutually interpenetrative themes: 'the difficulties of imaging God [and] also the inadequacy of language as we use it to express perceptions of God.'<sup>119</sup>

According to this reading, then, the 'essence of meaning cannot be transposed because it is fixed in something other than language'<sup>120</sup> and Shepherd discerns Thomas's 'relentless pursuit of the vanishing God,' as Brian Morris has described Him,<sup>121</sup> to culminate with a theology where 'silence itself is explored as a possible locus of communication'.<sup>122</sup> This exegesis leads, *a fortiori*, to the overtly 'mystical' conclusion that the *via negativa* and its dialectical contrary may be momentarily combined through the reader's awareness of the poems as verbal configurations whose referential 'failure' is the measure of their imaginative success: 'What we might call negative or insubstantial forms—silence, invisibility—are given shape through verbs and adjectives which suggest positive forms of being and substance. It is the reader who, noting these verbs and adjectives, and working by a process of association,

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<sup>117</sup>Ibid., 50.

<sup>118</sup>Ibid., 133.

<sup>119</sup>Ibid., 87.

<sup>120</sup>Ibid., 136. At this point in her thesis, Shepherd counters the possible objection that Thomas firmly *denied* the tag 'mystic' by suggesting that this was mere 'modesty' on his part and that, in any event, 'his religious poetry has much in common with the characteristics of mysticism.' Ibid. Part of the confusion surrounding this issue no doubt originates from Thomas's refusal to be, as he said in an interview to Simon Barker, 'cornered by these orthodoxarians who are out for blood.' (Simon Barker, *Probing the God-Space: The Religious Poetry of R. S. Thomas*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wales [Lampeter], 1991, Appendix II, 304.) For example, responding to Lethbridge's prompt, 'You once said in an interview that you were a nature mystic'—a reference to the Ormond interview, 51—Thomas replied: 'I mean, I'm not a mystic. And here is grounds for misunderstanding and misinterpretation on the part of the critics and so on. I'm not a mystic and never claimed to be a mystic. I used the word "Nature Mystic" as some sort of attempt to describe what I get from Nature.' 'R.S. Thomas talks to J. B. Lethbridge,' 47.

<sup>121</sup>Brian Morris, 'Mr. Thomas's Present Concerns', in *Three Contemporary Poets: Thom Gunn, Ted Hughes and R.S. Thomas*, ed. A. E. Dyson (London: Macmillan, 1990), 236.

<sup>122</sup>Shepherd, 137.

constructs the image of “The Presence”.<sup>123</sup>

A similar line to Shepherd's 'reader-response' initiated critique (or, more precisely, what Iser would term 'a continual interplay between modified expectations and transformed memories')<sup>124</sup> is taken by Alistair Heys, who sees Thomas as a poet of vacillation 'between nationalism and religion, secular identity and the holiness of the heart's affections, where these latter are often reworked tropes and figures borrowed from Romantic precursors.'<sup>125</sup> Assuming, first of all, that Thomas's theology is indeed gripped by the *via negativa*,<sup>126</sup> Heys reads the oeuvre as advocating 'an interactionist theory of metaphor'.<sup>127</sup> Quoting Coleridge, Heys argues that the purpose of this is 'to reconcile opposites and qualify contradictions, leaving a middle state of mind more strictly appropriate to the imagination than any other, when it is, as it were, hovering between images.'<sup>128</sup> Like K.E. Smith and Colin Meir,<sup>129</sup> Heys's view is that Thomas

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<sup>123</sup>Ibid., 140.

<sup>124</sup>Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: John Hopkins U. P., 1978), 111.

<sup>125</sup>Alistair Heys, *R.S. Thomas and Romanticism* (Bulgaria: Pygmalion Press, 2004), 51. Tony Brown has also written on Thomas's relationship with Romanticism, commenting that from as early as 'The Tree' (*An Acre of Land*), a poem narrated by Owain Glyn Dwr, Thomas was fully aware 'of the central role which the poet, the bard, had at the courts of medieval Wales' and that 'this awareness coalesced with Thomas's reading of the English Romantic poets, with their emphasis on the political and social role of the poet.' 'The Romantic Nationalism of R.S. Thomas,' in *The Literature of Place*, ed. Norman Page & Peter Preston (London: Macmillan, 1993), 158. In addition, there is an important earlier piece by Rudolf G. Carpanini, 'Romanticism in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas,' in *Annali dell' Istituto di Lingue e Letterature Germaniche*, 6 (1980-1), 113-148, which connects Thomas's religious epistemology with Keatsian Platonism: 'both Keats and Thomas are ultimately concerned with the nature of knowledge. They share the belief that real knowledge is something more than the empirical verification of phenomena, important and indispensable as this is, not only in checking the truth perceived by the imagination, but also for its enlargement and enrichment. Thus, just as Keats strove to align his "abstractions" with the observed facts of actual experience, so Thomas seeks confirmation for his religious belief in the same world of the here and now. Both are, of course, committed to a desperate enterprise, and the despair of the poet in *The Fall of Hyperion*, though coloured by special emphases of its own, is similar to that of Thomas's believer, nailed to the cross by his need to understand the mystery he feels.' 135-136. (This last reference is to 'The Journey' in *Poetry for Supper*.)

<sup>126</sup>For example: 'It might be emphasized that because Thomas was an ex-Classics student, a sermon-writing Anglican priest and an ardent reader of Welsh poetry, the problem of intra-textuality in his work is extremely complex. The originality of this study lies in the fact that it focuses upon Romantic echoes- unlike other books, which have tended to concentrate upon the biblical allusions and, therefore the theological implications of Thomas's negative theology, or else, his nationalism as part of a biographical or a political interpretation of his poetry. The implications of these aesthetic approaches are that readers tend to recognise Thomas the negative theologian or Thomas the nationalist at the expense of Thomas the belated Romantic poet.' Ibid., 38.

<sup>127</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>128</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>129</sup>K.E. Smith 'Two Poets', in *Planet* (1971), 77: 'R.S. Thomas is the only true successor of Wordsworth in English poetry, the only writer to have discerned and developed his underlying purposes,' (meaning Wordsworth's kinship with 'simplistic' aesthetics and his notion of sublimity, the "bright field vision"—from 'The Bright Field,' *Laboratories of the Spirit*—as Heys calls it, 110); Colin Meir, 'The Poetry of R.S. Thomas,' in *British Poetry Since 1970: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Peter Jones & Michael Schmidt (Manchester: Carcanet, 1980), 11-12:

inherits an aesthetic language from, in particular, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Blake and Yeats, but that the Bloomian anxiety of influence is continually denied whilst concurrently accepted.<sup>130</sup> In Heys's view, the tropes bequeathed by the republican poets of the Romantic period find in Thomas a reactive anti-Romantic expression and, although Heys is at pains to substitute Bloom's theory that inspiration is followed by expansion with the more Borgian one in which inspiration is followed by revision, influence, nevertheless, 'is the omnipresent principle of [Thomas's] poetic language.'<sup>131</sup>

From such a starting point, Heys then moves to consider the religious poetry<sup>132</sup> and makes the interesting statement that in the later work Prytherch's 'vacant mind' becomes 'the rough equivalent of the dark of God.'<sup>133</sup> Glossing Thomas's middle period output with Yeat's cyclic view of history, Heys argues that the 'harsh pastoral' of the Prytherch verses gradually metamorphosizes into 'nature mysticism'<sup>134</sup>—in the same way that the Yeatsian gyre of religion inflates as that of secular existence narrows—and regards the dominant chords of the

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'The culminating recognition [...] that "The meaning is in the waiting" leads directly to the understanding of presence in absence [...] And it is this state of mind which allows for both praise and vision. Here [from *H'm* to *Frequencies*] the concrete images Thomas uses repeatedly link religion and nature, either through allusion to a biblical text, as in 'The Bright Field' [...] which concerns a Wordsworthian moment in time [...] or in direct sacramental reference.'

<sup>130</sup>Cf. Hey's comment that 'Walter Llywarch' (*Tares*) echoes Blake's 'London' but that Thomas turns his poem 'into an influential metaphor; that of a Welsh nationalist poet married to an English tradition'. Heys also says that Thomas, via the Blakean undertones, 'adopts a prophetic stance that the Welsh recognize as a subliminal part of their inheritance.' *Ibid.*, 57-58.

<sup>131</sup>*Ibid.*, 54. Heys continues this line of reasoning by arguing the further, somewhat contentious point, that Thomas perceived the primary imagination as 'Welsh' and the secondary as 'English.'

<sup>132</sup>It is worth noting that on several occasions Heys is keen to emphasize that, in his opinion, the religious poetry is aesthetically inferior to the political. See for example, 44, 'the nationalist poems are more energetically beautiful than the religious ones,' and 49, 'In my view the voice of honest [political] indignation in Thomas's poetry is more absorbing than his deeply moving quest for the Hidden God.' Also, Heys's earlier paper, 'Frost's Cruel Chemistry' (*Coleridge Bulletin*, New Series 20, Winter 2002) on which he bases Chapter 4 of his book, draws attention to the fact that, 'Thomas's usage of negative theology is often interpreted in the light of pseudo-Dionysius's apophatic theology but this discussion adheres to Johnson's dictum that: "The ideas of Christian theology are too simple for eloquence, too sacred for fiction, and too majestic for ornament; to recommend them by tropes and figures is to magnify by a concave mirror the sidereal hemisphere." As such the sidereal stigmata of 'Via Negativa' are here related not to Meister Eckhart or the Areopagite but to Coleridge and the last sentence of *Biographia Literaria*, 2-3.

<sup>133</sup>*Ibid.*, 333.

<sup>134</sup>*Ibid.*, 318. Although Heys denies the comparison (293) this seems similar to Jeremy Hooker's point in *Imagining Wales: A View of Modern Welsh Writing in English* (Cardiff: U. W. P., 2001) 32, that Prytherch allowed Thomas to emerge from the influence of Yeats by enabling him to engage with *himself* as opposed to the concerns, whether religious, secular or nationalistic, of his predecessors.

poetry to resonate with, ‘the dialectic between Anglicanism and naturalism, which latter can be associated with secular modes of transcendence.’<sup>135</sup> This is seen especially, contends Heys, when the ‘Prytherch figure’s dark mind’, which has hitherto ‘represented the nadir of Thomas’s quest for a Welsh-speaking community’, becomes reincarnated ‘as an analogue for Christ’, which in turn, ‘grants a duality of perspective representative of the hope for spiritual salvation and Byzantine unity’:<sup>136</sup>

It is appropriate then that in Thomas’s later poetry often what he desires is some sight of God’s presence since the figure of the departed God has taken the place of the Prytherch figure narratives that act as the dialectical Thomasian Daimon or that being, or perhaps soulless lack of being, which stimulates Thomas’s imagination [...] this is true of Thomas’s poetic biography since his concern for the farming figure decreases as his search for the *Deus Absconditus* intensifies. We recall Thomas’s lament that he is a prisoner of an age that is unimaginative; this judgement agrees with the priest-poet’s hope that, like the moon controlled tides that erode the coastline near St. Hywyn’s, the darkness of God will turn into a new enlightenment. Though, somewhat paradoxically, Thomas wishes for a godly Dark Age of illuminated rubrics and not a new rationalistic or Lockean age of Enlightenment.<sup>137</sup>

Heys’s critique is more concerned with Thomas’s political as opposed to theological leanings, although his various insinuations on Thomas as a ‘misplaced Romantic’<sup>138</sup> whose fundamental literary-metaphysical concern is to establish the differences between ‘religious

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<sup>135</sup>Ibid., 332.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid., 320.

<sup>137</sup>Ibid., 321-322.

<sup>138</sup>Ibid., 45.

quietism and bellowing poetry'<sup>139</sup> is to some extent mirrored by the slightly earlier, more expressly theological reading of Christopher Morgan. Morgan also detects in Thomas a form of Tennysonian despair which, as the 1970s progressed, was gradually able to resolve itself with the '*via affirmativa*' poems of the mid-1980s. Beginning with the 'Introduction' to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse* and the *Times Literary Supplement* article 'A Frame for Poetry' of three years later—in which Thomas compares religious poetry of the past with the literary barrenness of the present day—Morgan extrapolates three core questions which Thomas will subsequently endeavour to answer in his verse: what constitutes the 'religious framework' of poetry?; what is the nature of 'religious truth?'; and what is Thomas's view of the relationship between religion and poetry? Morgan sees the first two of these questions as finding potential answers within the nexus of 'a wide-ranging *multiplicity* in the understanding and experience of divinity'.<sup>140</sup> Morgan then proceeds to stress the underlying organicism of Thomas's answer to the third question:

the act of writing, the imaginative expression of the experience of ultimate reality, as well as the act of reading, the reflexive imagining of that experience, become a transformation, a metamorphosis of writer and reader into the process, and therefore the very being, of deity [...] And it is this intellectual 'breadth' that is one of the most important characteristics and contributions of Thomas's religious poems: the expansive and inclusive nature of his intellectual position regarding the personal experience of ultimate reality as the essential raw

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<sup>139</sup>Ibid., 58. Like several scholars already mentioned, Heys views Thomas as a poet who 'finds language impotent to fully represent the eternal' (Ibid., 47, in connection with 'The White Tiger', *Frequencies*) and, in an even stronger moment, declares that for Thomas, language is 'useless to know ultimate reality.' (Ibid., 125, in connection with the Ormond interview.)

<sup>140</sup>Christopher Morgan, *R.S. Thomas: Identity, Environment and Deity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 152. Emphasis in original.

material of poetry.<sup>141</sup>

Employing as an additional interpretative template Bishop Robinson's *Honest to God* with its influential argument that deistic conceptions of God must be replaced by theistic imagings—a text Thomas of course knew intimately<sup>142</sup>—Morgan contrasts the mythic poems of *H'm* with the *via negativa* poems of *Frequencies*, and finalizes his exegesis by making a further contrast with what he designates as the '*via affirmativa*' poems of *Destinations*. According to this interpretation, Thomas gradually progressed from what Morgan terms prophetic-apocalyptic work, that is, poetry 'authoritative in tone [...] and visionary in aspect',<sup>143</sup> towards a 'reworking of more dogmatic structures in favour of a poetic grappling with spiritual struggle, and even paradox, which is nearer, both in its language and its substance, to individual spiritual experience than to stricter theoretical constructions of the objective nature of God.'<sup>144</sup> Here, the keynote is a 're-posing, re-inventing, and re-interpreting [of] traditional “actions” of a monotheistic creator-God'<sup>145</sup> and the verses of *H'm* especially (Morgan identifies eleven of the thirty-seven poems as following this rhetorical model) present an understanding 'not so much of what divinity is, but of what divinity could be'.<sup>146</sup> This, maintains Morgan, is then further refined by a continuing meditation 'on Judaeo-Christian monotheism and its gradual movement from Old Testament to New Testament paradigms'.<sup>147</sup>

Morgan's argument is as such firmly onto-theological; in the same manner that Robinson postulated a topographical or directional shift from transcendent deism to a more

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<sup>141</sup>Ibid., 154.

<sup>142</sup>In a letter to Simon Barker, however, Thomas wrote: 'I don't remember being very impressed by Robinson's book, and “death of God” talk seems to me rubbish.' (Barker, 295). That said, and as Morgan correctly states (170), the comment about Robinson in the final pages of *Neb* is clearly complimentary.

<sup>143</sup>Ibid., 154.

<sup>144</sup>Ibid., 155-156.

<sup>145</sup>Ibid., 158. Morgan at this point is referring to 'Once', the opening poem of *H'm*, whose 'philosophical or imaginative reworkings' of traditional monotheistic theology Morgan sees as forming the core 'of virtually all of Thomas's mythic poems.' Ibid.

<sup>146</sup>Ibid., 162.

<sup>147</sup>Ibid., 166.

intimate and ubiquitous theism—which Morgan further glosses with Tillich's 'ground of being' formulation—Thomas too, in his movement from the mythic to the *via negativa*, is attempting to indicate 'a more positive realisation of that theistic God, depicting divinity not as absence and darkness but as renewed presence or light, an actuality no longer to be inferred.'<sup>148</sup> This argument suggests that Thomas is therefore presenting us with a 'mystical' appropriation of divinity's essential character, a point Morgan makes explicit when discussing 'The Flower' (*LS*, 25) which, he argues, is intended to symbolize, 'an ascetic withdrawal, the giving up of sight and sound, the dwelling in darkness and shadow [...] such withdrawals, in keeping with the *via negativa* as a technique of approach, are embraced solely in pursuit of spiritual "riches", a kind of mystical union with the divine.'<sup>149</sup>

Insufferable absence as indicative of compassionate presence is located by Morgan as reaching its thematic apotheosis in *Frequencies*, a collection which, says Morgan, 'manifests most widely Thomas's preoccupation with the idea of the *via negativa* as an experience of deity.'<sup>150</sup> In poems such as 'Groping' and 'Pilgrimages', Thomas, in Morgan's view, turns from cosmic investigations of an incalculable 'God-space'—at times as blinding in its murky luminosity as Vaughan's 'dazzling darkness'<sup>151</sup>—to a more receptive and empathetic poetry, where, liberated from the existential irony of the mythic work, the accent of theological discernment rests, 'not so much on the goal of empirical knowledge as on the possibility of intuited understanding.'<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>148</sup>Ibid., 173.

<sup>149</sup>Ibid., 174.

<sup>150</sup>Ibid., 175.

<sup>151</sup>From 'The Night' and quoted by Morgan, 175. It is worth mentioning, however, that Vaughan's poem may not be as theologically prescriptive (and affirmative) as Morgan suggests. See A. B. Chambers, *Transfigured Rites in Seventeenth-Century English Poetry* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), who contrasts the line with the opening two lines of 'Childe-hood'—'I cannot reach it; and my striving eye/ Dazles at it, as at eternity'—and concludes that in the former poem, 'the human self could scarcely be anything other than invisible and dim when totally surrounded by the dazzling darkness of God and by every other standard imaginable could never be supernally transfigured into more radiant glory,' 48. See also Jonathan F. S. Post, *Henry Vaughan: The Unfolding Vision* (Princeton: P. U. P., 1982), who argues that 'The Night' is, 'a response to the invading darkness rather than an exercise in mystical ascent.' 201.

<sup>152</sup>Morgan, 176.



This movement from mythicism to the *via affirmativa* by way of the *via negativa*, entails a further imaginative leap. If divinity, like poetry, must exist through the accentuation of absence, then it follows that 'meaning [...] overflows language' and that 'the discourse of the *via negativa* is one in which words are continually denied their usual associations, in which language itself is "broken open" to accommodate the possibility of its opposite value in paradox.'<sup>153</sup> Like several critics previously mentioned, therefore, Morgan holds that much of the later work proposes 'an actual mistrust of language [...] as an adequate signifier of meaning'<sup>154</sup> and that Thomas, by rejecting the 'tyranny' of the utterance, whether written or spoken, is pointing us instead in the direction of:

a stance open to meaning as transcendent of the word and of the reason, meaning as overflowing vocabulary and logic, not to be dictated by the wilful administrations of language and rationality but, rather, received, accepted as larger than both. The movement here is towards a mystical or intuitive awareness as superior to a purely rationalistic understanding. Thomas is emphasising in these poems what he calls in 'Via Negativa' 'the interstices/ In our knowledge', that is, the 'gaps' in a rational understanding, not necessarily as a hindrance, but as the actual path towards an increased awareness of deity, a 'knowledge' which defies the expressive capabilities of language.<sup>155</sup>

Morgan concludes his study with a discussion of *Destinations* which he regards, *pace* R. Gerallt Jones and A. M. Allchin,<sup>156</sup> as 'the most substantial and explicit evidence of a gradual

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<sup>153</sup>Ibid., 179.

<sup>154</sup>Ibid., 179-180.

<sup>155</sup>Ibid., 180.

<sup>156</sup>R. Gerallt Jones, reviewing *Later Poems*, stated that the poems in the 'New Poems' section displayed a 'more positive consciousness of a purposeful Creator in the observable phenomena of the universe as well as the inner stirrings of the spirit,' (*Later Poems*, in *Book News/ Llais Llyfrau*, Autumn, 1983, 10) For A. M. Allchin

shift towards affirmation in Thomas's work'.<sup>157</sup> In this collection, argues Morgan, Thomas seems to 'have evolved spiritually out of unfathomable space and the predominating experience of absence, not towards contentment or truce, but clearly into an expanded vision'.<sup>158</sup> This religious 'positivity' is engaged as early as the first poem, 'The Message', where it is deity itself, as opposed to 'one of Thomas's interior selves,' which proclaims that finding an answer or resolution to the problems of theology is 'no longer of paramount importance'.<sup>159</sup> Morgan sees this epistemic confidence as manifest throughout the volume; the opening poem's metaphor of the bird is repeated in 'Vocabulary' (*D*, 11) with its obvious post-Flood imagery—Morgan, indeed, suggests that the allusion to Noah 'underscores the death of the old for Thomas, the "flooding out" of an older order'<sup>160</sup>—and the sonnet 'The Other' (*D*, 15) confirms that prayer has now become 'a part of the natural rhythm too, in league with the cry of the beasts and the crash of the surf, and endlessly acceptable to God.'<sup>161</sup> In *Destinations*, Morgan maintains, Thomas is finally able to fuse the mystical and the secular and achieve the long-awaited 'knitting together of worlds,' a type of metaphysical holism which makes the collection in its entirety 'strangely redolent of new hope.'<sup>162</sup>

John Powell Ward, upon whom Morgan occasionally leans for critical support,<sup>163</sup> similarly argues that Thomas' 'orientations were always to do with [...] the mystical listening for the godhead and poetic expression of its perennial elusiveness.'<sup>164</sup> Separating Thomas's

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('Emerging: A Look at Some of R. S. Thomas' More Recent Poems', in *Theology*, September 1978, vol. 81, 352-361), it is *Laboratories of the Spirit* which most powerfully shows us that, 'Beyond the darkness there is light. Absence long experienced can unexpectedly reveal itself as presence. And these affirmations carry all the more weight since they have emerged on the other side of despair.' 352. Quotation from Gerallt Jones cited by Morgan, 186.

<sup>157</sup>Morgan, 188.

<sup>158</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup>*Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>160</sup>*Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>161</sup>*Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>162</sup>*Ibid.*, 193. Morgan also sees this refraction of the divine through the material/ physical in the poems exploring what he calls the 'particular unity of human love' (191) such as 'He and She' and 'Mother and Child.'

<sup>163</sup>See for example Morgan, 174 and 183.

<sup>164</sup>*The Poetry of R. S. Thomas* (Bridgend: Seren, 2001), 14.

work into three distinct periods,<sup>165</sup> Ward argues that the second of these periods is absorbed with ‘the echo of Augustine [which] merges with the necessary stance of twentieth-century man. Like Simone Weil and Beckett’s tramps, Thomas waits.’<sup>166</sup> The third period, according to Ward,

enters on a new flow or current of language. He [Thomas] has to recognize the fragmented nature of modern discourse, the human speech that can no longer name reliable entities and events, and instead is simply the minimal, often desperate language by which we keep in touch with each other at all. The pain continues. There are elisions, incomplete sequences of thought or feeling, apparent doubts, cancellings, and half-expressions leading to spontaneous connections.<sup>167</sup>

This thesis, to some extent similar to Brown’s, Davis’s and Phillips’s, regards Thomas’s noticeable usage of ‘lists’ and synecdoche in the 1970s as signifying an ‘utterly levelled movement’ that renders ‘the evoked people helpless’.<sup>168</sup> In Ward’s reading, even such ostensibly Herbertian or ‘devotional’ poems as ‘The Flower’ and ‘Sea-Watching’ (*LS*, 25; 31) are fundamentally ambivalent in their theological projections; although both texts ‘parallel the divine presence’, they also ‘by being so vividly present, stop the approach to the absent formless God himself.’<sup>169</sup> According to Ward, the obvious Yeatsianism of a poem such as ‘The Moon in Lleyn’—described by John Ackerman as indicative of ‘faith’s ceremony and lineage,

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<sup>165</sup>The first from *The Stones of the Field to Tares*, the second comprising *The Bread of Truth*, *Pieta* and *Not That He Brought Flowers*, and the third *H’m*, *Laboratories of the Spirit* and *Frequencies*.

<sup>166</sup>Ward, 90.

<sup>167</sup>*Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>168</sup>*Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>169</sup>*Ibid.*, 106.

of the ceaseless pilgrimage of the human spirit,'<sup>170</sup> and by Belinda Humfrey as suggesting 'the necessity, for artistic creation, of spirit's incarnation'<sup>171</sup>—represents not so much Christian certainty in the Second Coming as a desperately *aspirational* faith which must, at the risk of absurdity, be realised only in silence:

the poet's main difficulty, about language, is not resolved by 'The Moon in Lley'n'. It may be that in expectation of the people's real or analogical return he is right to stay by the church, so far as that goes. But, in this and the other prayer poems, he has still not found the language that emanates from and returns to God from humanity through our thin, two-dimensional language of today. Prayer is necessary but it is not enough. If a chance remains that such a language is to be found he still must look for it. This would not be a language from God through the poet to the people; R. S. Thomas is no evangelist. It would be a language from our modern world but usable in the approach to God.<sup>172</sup>

Ward's argument is especially interesting, as he is one of the few critics to suggest, albeit tentatively, that a possible escape from 'the secular godless language of our time'<sup>173</sup> could be located within Thomas's exploration of onto-theological 'division' itself: 'the original fork/ in existence' ('Amen', *LS*, 5) is, says Ward, 'the metaphysical centre of what is said'.<sup>174</sup> By continually drawing attention to what in a similar context Rowan Williams has glossed as Thomas's engagement with the Heideggerean *Riss*,<sup>175</sup> the poet, argues Ward is 'evoking matters

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<sup>170</sup>R. S. Thomas: *Laboratories of the Spirit*, in *Poetry Wales*, vol. II, no. 2 (1975), 150.

<sup>171</sup>'*Laboratories of the Spirit* by R. S. Thomas', in *Anglo-Welsh Review*, 25, no. 56 (1976), 171.

<sup>172</sup>Ward, 110.

<sup>173</sup>*Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>174</sup>*Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>175</sup>'Adult Geometry', 88. Like Ward, Williams highlights the apparent 'Derrideanism' of *Frequencies* and suggests that in 'The Gap' with its extended metaphor of a language which 'threatens to deliver equality with God', Thomas is perhaps alluding to, 'the shadowing of language by what is never said, of the solution by the other question not asked or answered. The shadowing is both what makes language possible (because language must be committed

which are at the heart of late twentieth century understanding of reality.<sup>176</sup> 'Thomas,' continues Ward, 'is actually writing this rupture, updating the theological myth into the act of writing itself,'<sup>177</sup> and his ability to 'ironize the very language he uses'<sup>178</sup>—in contradistinction, according to Ward, to the 'explicit' apophaticism of the Author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*—results in a theology which postulates that:

the search, language, silence and fatigue, that *absence itself* is what the modern secularized apprehension of God entails. Somehow the very absence itself is affirmation of, not God's presence, but God's existence. This is no new idea. The Hebrew poet who cried out "How long, Lord? will thou hide thyself for ever?" (Psalms lxxxix 46), and the mediaeval *deus absconditus*, the God who has withdrawn himself, both expressed it. But Thomas has felt it in the context of a twentieth century cosmos with apparently no outside, a microscopically viewed world we cannot fathom, and a language which somehow stutters and refuses to speak. God's absence can be seen as not just that: a blank, a nothing. The French philosopher Bergson (also adduced by Thomas in this period) has termed 'nothing' as always, for human apprehension anyway, a space where 'something' has to have been. We can never conceive 'nothing' without the

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to saying this and not that, it is always a suppression as well as expression), and also what relativises and undermines what is said (not only this could be said). And while the identification of Derrida's *differance* with the God of classical negative theology is—as Derrida himself has insisted—too facile a resolution, the Derridean model does seem to have some pertinence to Thomas' picture of the relation of God to language, and suggests a structure for holding together the complex of metaphors and myths.' Tony Brown (*R. S. Thomas, Writers of Wales*, 6) regards this 'unease which ultimately amounted to what might, in existentialist terms, be defined as a sense of inauthenticity, the sense, again, of not being in secure possession of one's own identity,' as having at least one point of origin in the tension between the young Thomas's avowed pacificism and the Church in Wales's refusal to oppose the burgeoning militarism of the 1930s and 40s.

<sup>176</sup>Ward, 95.

<sup>177</sup>Ibid., 97.

<sup>178</sup>Ibid., 110. Ward contrasts Thomas's preoccupation with 'verbal language' in *Frequencies* with what he terms other 'frequencies on which the poet taps out his message and waits in silence for an answer,' including 'the radio wave and sea wave (and the fishing line), the thought process itself, numbers, and waves of light.' Ibid.

outline of a shimmering shape which suggests what has been removed.<sup>179</sup>

Despite the apparently affirmative nature of this, however, Ward never goes as far as Morgan and Shepherd in declaring that the later poems present a 'sanctification of the secular'<sup>180</sup> or that 'the human is identified by the otherness of God,'<sup>181</sup> and Ward stresses throughout his reading that 'the attempt to articulate God turns out again and again to do that only insofar as God's elusiveness, his receding before the poet, is itself what gets expressed'.<sup>182</sup> In this respect, Ward's analysis is comparable in tone to M. J. J. van Buuren's 'post-Christian religion for a post-Christian generation'<sup>183</sup> exegesis, for, although van Buuren does not foreshadow Ward's sometime Derridean interpretation, his conclusion too is that Thomas, like Jeremy Hooker, believes 'modern language has become so "naked" of religious meaning that the reality it refers to can no longer be expressed.'<sup>184</sup>

M. J. J. van Buuren, similar to Christopher Morgan and John Powell Ward, separates the poetry into three distinct phases: the *via negativa* (especially the mythopoeic poems), the *via affirmativa*, and the mystical. Van Buuren, however, reverses Ward's second and third stages and, with another allusion to Vaughan, argues that 'Darkness, unlike the biblical idea of it, does not remain a negative concept in R. S. Thomas's poems.'<sup>185</sup> Because shadows 'reveal

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<sup>179</sup>Ibid., 123. My emphasis.

<sup>180</sup>Morgan, 193.

<sup>181</sup>Shepherd, 111.

<sup>182</sup>Ward, 112. Cf. his comments on the uncollected 'Cancellation' (*Poetry Wales*, Spring 1979), 99; 'Digest' (*H'm*), 101; 'The Combat' (*Laboratories of the Spirit*), 107; 'Shadows' (*Frequencies*), 112.

<sup>183</sup>*Waiting: The Religious Poetry of Ronald Stuart Thomas, Welsh Priest and Poet*, 7.

<sup>184</sup>From " 'The Naked Shingles of the World': Modern Poetry and the Crisis of Religious Language," in *The New Welsh Review*, vol. II, no. 3 (Winter, 1989-90), 47. Cited by van Buuren, 66. Hooker's article, a shortened and revised version of an address given at the Welsh Academy Conference on Literature and Religion, St. Beuno's, May, 1989, argues that with 'In Great Waters' (*Frequencies*), 'R.S. Thomas's imaginative perception of the central mystery of the Christian faith in the sea, traditionally a symbol of chaos, completely reverses Arnold's view, in "Dover Beach", that faith now exists *nowhere*'. Hooker also argues, juxtaposing 'In Great Waters' with the earlier and much anthologised 'The Moor' (*Pieta*) that, 'the natural vision itself is Christian, in the spiritual tradition of Thomas Traherne, whose imagination was excited by cosmic and elemental space, rather than that of Pascal and Kierkegaard, who viewed the night sky and the ocean depths with terror.' 52. Emphasis in original.

<sup>185</sup>Van Buuren, 124.

where the source of light is,<sup>186</sup> and because classical philosophical theism stipulates a God who is a "noumenon", a reality to be known, 'It' rather than a person,<sup>187</sup> the only direction possible for the poet is one of mystical self-cancellation:

In the end God is not to be known, as *The Cloud of Unknowing* states again and again, but only to be surrendered to. This process of ultimate surrender requires the suspension of all rational activity [...] A number of poems offer descriptions of what follows after the dark part of the road, or rather, after the darkness of the wrong road. It is never easy for R. S. Thomas to still the intellectual curiosity of his mind. Language, words and images will keep welling up like a fountain [...] His mind and soul have to be readjusted, or purged, as the mystics call it [...] R. S. Thomas has discovered that he must give up his intellectual curiosity, his mental hunger for understanding and insight.<sup>188</sup>

The concept of 'waiting', either for 'drawing God's attention' or 'a moment of ecstasis'<sup>189</sup> is regarded by van Buuren as 'the essence of mysticism'.<sup>190</sup> Thomas is seen as direct inheritor of Marin Buber's hypothesis that theological revelation or divine intimacy (or 'The Presence', as van Buuren, paraphrasing the Tetragrammaton calls it) consists in passing through certain 'gates' or 'spheres of reality,' which Buber in *Ich und Du* registers as Nature, Human Beings and Spiritual Realities. For example, the important poem 'Llananno' (*Laboratories of the Spirit*) is described by way of a gloss from Evelyn Underhill's seminal *The Essentials of Mysticism and Other Essays*—where mysticism is located within 'the intuitive contact with that

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<sup>186</sup>Ibid., 125.

<sup>187</sup>Ibid., 135.

<sup>188</sup>Ibid., 139.

<sup>189</sup>Ibid., 143-144.

<sup>190</sup>Ibid.

ultimate reality which theologians mean by Godhead and philosophers by the Absolute'<sup>191</sup>—with van Buuren's careful reading of the concluding stanza emphasizing 'a subtle paradox in R. S. Thomas's religious poetry. On the one hand one ought to describe his spiritual experiences as mystical in the true sense of the word; on the other he cannot describe them, even if he wanted to. It is wholly in line with what is described by mystical writers as the in-expressibility of mystical experiences.'<sup>192</sup>

In van Buuren's interpretation, this form of spiritual transcendence was engaged as early as the 'Two Chapels' article of 1948, where the experience at Maes-yr-Onnen—prefiguring perhaps, the later 'Abercuawg' address, although this is not a comparison made by van Buuren—foregrounds that 'for [Thomas] God is visibly and triumphantly present in Nature'.<sup>193</sup> This realisation subsequently leads to 'a direct and immediate form of knowledge and understanding [...] a kind of ecstasis even.'<sup>194</sup> From this, it is of course only a short step to the apophatically-premised conclusion that 'religious/ mystical experience can never be adequately expressed in words',<sup>195</sup> although van Buuren qualifies this somewhat with his pronouncement that 'poetry [...] is far better equipped to convey any, however tentative, communication about mystical experiences.'<sup>196</sup> Poetic experience is thus analogous, albeit in a restricted fashion, to religious/ mystical knowledge, and for van Buuren the oft-cited 'poetry is religion, religion is poetry' (from the Ormond interview), is nothing less than a literal truth: mysticism is the intellectual and emotional sibling of poetry for 'religious and mystical experiences prepare the

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<sup>191</sup>Quoted by van Buuren, 151.

<sup>192</sup>Ibid., 152. Van Buuren also explores 'The Moor' (*Pieta*), 'In a Country Church' (*Song at the Year's Turning*) and 'Suddenly' (*Laboratories of the Spirit*) and finds in all these poems 'the massiveness of feeling that emanates from The Presence, so much so that the poet feels enveloped, wrapped in The Presence. 'Seeing' is not meant in the physical sense because there is no picture. The impression has unearthly features: time and place have lost validity.' Ibid., 154. Similar to Shepherd, van Buuren contends that despite the poet's explicit rejection of mysticism, 'he certainly is one [a mystic] in another sense' because 'His frame of mind consists of a mixture of 1. a deep hunger for intellectual analysis, 2. an inborn urgency to articulate his emotions and insights in poetry, and 3. an equally radical desire to surrender to whatever he sees as the Ground of Being' which van Buuren regards as stages of 'purification' leading to 'contemplative wisdom.' Ibid., 142.

<sup>193</sup>Ibid., 81.

<sup>194</sup>Ibid., 81-82.

<sup>195</sup>Ibid., 67.

<sup>196</sup>Ibid.



way towards eventual unity with God' while 'poetic experience unites with reality as perceived and interpreted by the senses.'<sup>197</sup>

Finally, the most 'positive' critical discussions of the *Deus absconditus* theme are the most recent. In the issue of *Agenda* already referred to, for example, K.A. Perryman argues that, 'Waiting is often compared with prayer. It seems not to lead anywhere, but there is something in the description that makes the process of waiting almost mystical: doubt and patience, passion and peace, absence— and its opposite.'<sup>198</sup> Perryman expands his critique with the comment (on 'Folk Tale', *EA*, 53) that, 'The priest will pray, the poet will watch, or let his eyes rest on a familiar face or a field with the visionary's combination of absent-minded gaze and intensity. The visionary, in spite of everything, chooses not to disbelieve the possibility of vision'.<sup>199</sup> This 'Thomas-as-seer' suggestion is further propounded by Grey Gowrie in the same volume. Gowrie sees Thomas's Christian 'mysticism' as an adaptation of the 'mythic' work of David Jones and the Eliot of *Four Quartets*:

The *Quartets* depend on a feeling of quest or pilgrimage. Eliot sweats blood for an encompassing myth. But no burning bush appears, no scene on the road from Damascus takes place. Only the journey allows the shaft of transfiguration when a personal moment of emotion becomes communal and a communal moment becomes cosmic. A philosopher might describe these poets as historical ontologists: we read their poems because they are beautiful and because they help. Herein lies the dilemma for any late twentieth century poet writing in or around a religious tradition [...] Thomas's God is indeed capable of including

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<sup>197</sup>Ibid. Van Buuren draws a distinction between 'devotional' and 'mystical' poetry, the former referring 'to religious poetry with an *external* subject: the Deity, Jesus, creation, nature, the Church, the saints, etc.' and the latter 'to religious poetry with an *internal* subject, i.e. a personal state of desire to enter an ever-deepening spiritual intimacy with the Deity.' Ibid., 55. Emphasis in original.

<sup>198</sup>K.A.Perryman, 'Observation and Observance,' in *Agenda: A Tribute to R.S.Thomas*, 22.

<sup>199</sup>Ibid., 23.

the most contradictory experience, not least his own absence.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>200</sup>Grey Gowrie, 'The Witness of R.S.Thomas,' in *Agenda: A Tribute to R.S.Thomas*, 14-19. Gowrie's paper was originally a lecture given on 8th October 1998 at Chester Cathedral. In the same volume, A.M. Allchin makes a similar point, writing that Thomas has, 'a deep sense of affinity with perhaps the greatest of Welsh mystical writers,' who is, in Allchin's view, Ann Griffiths. See 'R.S.Thomas: Some Recent Poems,' in *Agenda*, 73 and also Allchin's 'An inexplicable note of hope', in *New Welsh Review*, 5.4, 20, (1993), 12-14. The influence of *Four Quartets* on Thomas' poetry has also been noted by John Ackerman in his review of *Experimenting with an Amen: R.S. Thomas: Poet for Our Time*, in *Anglo-Welsh Review*, 85 (1987), 103-111. Thomas himself in the Lethbridge interview mentioned Eliot's importance to him. See 'R.S. Thomas talks to J.B. Lethbridge,' *Anglo-Welsh Review*, No.74 (1983), 47.

## Chapter Two

### **‘Playing the old anthropomorphic game’: Taxonomy, Perceptual Revitalization, and Theological (Im)Possibility in *The Stones of the Field* (1946) to *Pietà* (1966)**

Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea *is* the fact. The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry.<sup>1</sup>

What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later?<sup>2</sup>

In the previous chapter we saw that many critics of Thomas centre their exegesis upon suppositions concerning the poet's alleged religious ontology: Thomas's God is absent, so the argument runs, therefore any attempt to postulate meaningful statements concerning Him is either mere vanity (in the Ecclesiastian sense) or else a retreat, as it were, into the ineffability of mysticism. One cannot 'think' God and in consequence once cannot 'say' Him; epistemic 'boundedness', lifting a phrase from Andre Kukla, entails ineffability and because human beings very probably *are* epistemically bounded there must also exist correspondingly ineffable states of affairs in human language, and it these to which we are repeatedly directed by the

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew Arnold, 'The Study of Poetry', in *Matthew Arnold's Essays in Criticism: First and Second Series* (London: Dent, 1964), 235.

<sup>2</sup>Samuel Beckett, *The Unnameable*, in *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnameable* (London: John Calder, 1959), 293.

poet.<sup>3</sup> Thomas's rhetoric of absence, appearing as it does to dovetail with contemporary scepticism concerning religious belief, has meaning in a way that kerygmatic affirmations of God's presence do not, and his continual foregrounding of what Anne Stevenson in her review of *The Echoes Return Slow* calls 'the equations [...] between religion and art, liturgy and poetry,' are suggestive of a 'characteristic schism: Thomas the artist versus Thomas the man of God. Or perhaps better, Thomas the arrogant versus Thomas the humble. Or perhaps better still, art versus nature, but both bound into the incomprehensible nature of God.'<sup>4</sup>

In contradistinction to this view, I would like to suggest that Thomas, in his first eight collections, is investing both secular and religious poetry with metaphysical *plenitude*. Thomas, I will argue, is 'negating' monocular definitions in order to (re)classify or 'deconstruct' our perceptual and explanatory archetypes and, by so doing, is emphasizing the metaphysical oppositions and dialectical corollaries embedded within them. If this is correct, then it could also be argued that Thomas's interest in perception dovetails with what A. M. Allchin deciphers as a clearly discernable 'movement' within Welsh poetry. Exploring the theme of praise in the Welsh poetic tradition, Allchin writes that a central concern of numerous twentieth-century Welsh poets is the relationship between perception and divinity:

One of the words in Welsh which is difficult, if not impossible, to translate into

English is *synhwyrus*. It is an adjective which means 'perceived by the senses'.

It is not *sensitive* for that has a gentle almost feeble sound to it in English, and

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<sup>3</sup>Andre Kukla, *Ineffability and Philosophy* (Oxford: Routledge, 2005). On the important point as to whether or not the ineffable is sayable, Kukla writes: 'When mystics claim to have an ineffable insight, they must be drawing a distinction between ineffability and conveyability, for no human insight can be unconveyable—the fact that the mystic entertains it is already proof that humans can be caused to entertain it.' 18-19. Cf. Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), 26: 'There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing that they are unmediated. That is to say, *all* experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complex epistemological ways. The notion of unmediated experience seems, if not self-contradictory, at best empty'.

<sup>4</sup>*Poetry Wales*, 24.2 (Autumn 1988), 67.

*synhwyrus* is strong and active. It is not *sensuous* for that in modern English has too specialized a meaning, it is too much a matter of silks and satins and langours. It might in the past have been translated by *sensible*; but that is no longer possible since at least in common usage the word has connotations of caution and prudence from which the senses are virtually excluded. But the Welsh poets of the twentieth century again and again are calling us to open our eyes to see and our ears to hear. They are calling on us to perceive the world in which we live and to perceive God in it. Gwenallt begins one of his finest sonnets, with the affirmation ‘God has not forbidden us to love the world’ and he ends it by speaking of that day of resurrection when the body will be restored to us, so that we may *synhwyruso gogoniannau Duw*, ‘perceive the glories of God with all our senses’ [...] Of course in calling us to see things, and declaring what they themselves see, the poets of our own time are fulfilling the oldest of all the bardic functions, that of sight. The bards were seers, men of vision, who declared what they saw, who sang the glory of God perceived in all his doings.<sup>5</sup>

Thomas too appears exceptionally interested in the mechanics of perception; thus, it could easily be argued that he is ‘continuing’ the ‘bardic practice’ of attempting to perceive more than the immediately present. In addition, I propose to argue that, although much of the Manafon and Eglwys-fach poetry is not explicitly religious, it foreshadows Thomas’s later concerns with onto-theological classification and the relationships between divinity, language, and ‘silence’. A persistent motif throughout the verses from 1946-1966 concerns the ways in which we *observe* reality and therefore our *preconceived* taxonomic paradigms. Therefore, by underscoring Thomas’s *early* interest in the nature of the perceptual act itself, we are able to

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<sup>5</sup> *Praise Above All: Discovering the Welsh Tradition* (Cardiff: U. W. P., 1991), 37.

simultaneously emphasize what I propose to contend is the essential disputation of the religious poetry within the Aberdaron and ‘retirement’ collections; that is, a truly engaging and evocative theological poetics demands the *dramatization* of—as opposed to *rumination* upon—metaphysical and spiritual tension.

One immediately conspicuous feature of several reviews of *The Stones of the Field*, is the manner in which many scholars, even at this early stage, were conscious that Thomas often appears to be searching for the ‘interiority’ of his subjects. Dilys Rowe, for example, comments that Thomas’s ‘exclusion of Self is complete; he is never as Wordsworth is, the commentator behind the Cosmos’, and Cecil Price contends that the projected ‘self’ of the Montgomeryshire hillmen repels simplistic categorization: ‘what is this self? Mr. Thomas makes no easy guesses, plots no psychological charts. The countryman is an enigmatic figure’.<sup>6</sup>

The conundrum of Thomas’ hill farmers is sharply evident in the volume’s opening poem ‘Out of the Hills’ (*SF*, 7) where the clustering dreams of the Prytherch-figure in the first line inaugurate the chiaroscuro-like imagery sustained throughout the piece. The two stanzas are indicative of implied rather than accomplished resolution. The codified epithets and imagistic juxtapositions (why is the light in l. 5 ‘medicinal’ for example and then in l. 11 ‘officious’?), tricky personifications and synesthesia (‘the legendary town/ Dreams of his coming’ in ll. 8-9 and later becomes ‘indifferent’ in l. 18), suggest that in practically every clause of the poem Thomas is at pains to counteract the likelihood of ‘authoritative’ critical appraisal. To employ two slightly threadbare although still serviceable evaluative terms, our

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<sup>6</sup> Dilys Rowe, ‘*The Stones of the Field* by R. S. Thomas’, *Wales*, VII; 27 (1946) 229; Cecil Price, ‘The Poetry of R. S. Thomas’, *The Welsh Anvil*, IV (1952) 83. See also Glyn Jones who in his review (*Welsh Review*, VI; II (1947), 146), challenged the Druid Press’s description of *The Stones of the Field* as ‘nature poetry,’ writing that such an appellation suggests ‘Wordsworthian moralising’ and that Thomas seemed to be more concerned with an exploration of his character’s ‘obscure destiny’. See also Raymond Garlick’s contention that in Thomas’s first volume, the poet often felt compelled to ‘sear his speech against the impassive, imperturbable face of the earth and the tillers of the earth’. ‘*An Acre of Land* by R. S. Thomas’, *Dock Leaves*, III; VII (1952) 47.

analytical sensibility seems to equivocate between ‘impressionistic’ and ‘judicial’ readings of the poem, with neither assessment achieving interpretative preeminence. Prytherch *is* sharply delineated, but he remains a fundamentally *ambiguous* figure.<sup>7</sup>

With due deference to certain critical judgments regarding Prytherch, it seems on the whole fairly evident that Thomas did not intend us to construe his most famous creation as simply an instrument through which the poet could provide an ‘exposé’ of mid-twentieth century, Welsh agrarian life. Prytherch, far from being encased like some primordial insect in the amber of Thomas’s mind, appears persistently to usurp our expectations and thus also to contest our critical (in both the literary and non-literary senses of the term) judgments and anticipations. Prytherch is a figure of dynamic *potentiality* and as such should be understood as a type of ‘agent provocateur’ enlisted by the poet to compel his reader toward *perspectival reevaluation*. Indeed, perspectival ambiguity is apparent within the first five poems of the collection. These opening texts modulate between gentle, lyrical naturalism (‘They are white moths/ With wings/ Lifted/ Over a dark water/ In act to fly’, ‘Cyclamen’, *SF*, 11), shifting metaphorical contours and counter-balancings (‘Nor shot, nor shell, but the fused word,/ That rocks the world to its white root,/ Has wrought a chaos in the mind,/ And drained the love from the split heart’, ‘Propaganda’, *SF*, 11), and intricately controlled, rhetorical questioning: ‘Who can tell his years, for the winds have stretched/ So tight the skin on the bare racks of bone/ That his face is smooth, inscrutable as stone?’ (‘A Labourer’, *SF*, 8).

In continuation of this disparate imagery, the martial diction and booming hyperboles of ‘Homo Sapiens 1941’ (*SF*, 12)—‘daring the starlight’; ‘In a tower of spirit-dazzling’—are

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<sup>7</sup> Patrick Crotty’s excellent article, ‘“Extraordinary Man of the Bald Welsh Hills:” The Iago Prytherch Poems’, in *Echoes to the Amen: Essays After R. S. Thomas*, 13-43, provides a detailed discussion of Thomas’s various presentations of the Prytherch-figure, in addition to recounting some of the critical deductions engendered by him. Crotty’s view, surely correct, is that, ‘Too much critical and exegetical energy has been expended on explaining and even explaining away what the Prytherch series tells us about Thomas’s attitude to his flock’ and that the poems instead should be interpreted as ‘a sort of bundle of associations, a poetic shorthand enabling the poet to get on with what he does best throughout his career: exploring quandaries, projecting dichotomies’. 17-19.

brought down with a reverberating bump with the understated tenaciousness of ‘Pedestrian man’ holding ‘grimly on his way’ in l. 5, to escalate once more in the concluding line where the figure is mantled like a god with the ‘frenzy of solitude’, the epithet here itself combining ‘active’ and ‘passive’ tonal subtexts.<sup>8</sup> Thomas, even at this early stage, showed that he was far from reluctant to exhibit his mastery of tropic ‘multi-voicedness’, so that when we reach the eighth poem of the volume, the notorious ‘A Peasant’ (*SF*, 14), the complexities of the preceding poems have to some extent deflected the punch of the startling definition of Prytherch as our ‘prototype’ in l. 17 and its later extension in ‘Iago Prytherch’ (*SF*, 38), where he is additionally described as, ‘The first man of the new community’.<sup>9</sup> The poet’s eye is not so much on Prytherch as emblematic of the hillmen of his congregation, as on the descriptions the poet *himself* uses in conveying his own responses to them. Thomas, instinctively turning, one would imagine, to a more rhetorically hesitant poetry after the florid assurance of the Curtis Langdon/ Figaro verses of his apprenticeship,<sup>10</sup> seems concerned in the early Prytherch texts to accentuate the meandering and indeterminate nature of taxonomy and therefore of explanation itself; thus, the poems additionally indicate the sincere, yet at the same time problematic, connection, between the ‘bourgeois’ pastor and his proletarian flock.<sup>11</sup> Thomas’s relationship to Prytherch is not that of the ethnologist mentally ‘bottling’ and later ‘cataloguing’ his material. Rather, his connection to Prytherch is as complicated and poignant in its own way

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<sup>8</sup> M. Wynn Thomas in ‘R. S. Thomas: War Poet’ (*Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays*, 2; 1996, 82-97) makes a similar point, writing that the poem, ‘reads primarily as an ironic pastiche of the Romantic modernist style’, and later on that the collection as a whole pictures ‘the world not as reliably ordained or managed by a humanity-orientated God, but as provocatively neutral— glorious and harsh in equal measure, and expressing something of divinity in both its aspects’. 86, 95.

<sup>9</sup> Much has been written about what these two famous images actually mean. Patrick Crotty’s account of Prytherch as a character who enables Thomas to skilfully play ‘with the conventions of author-audience relationship to highlight the inadequacy of received responses to “low” subject matter,’ (‘Extraordinary Man of the Bald Welsh Hills’, 22) neatly encompasses many of the theological, philosophical and social functions we could ascribe to him.

<sup>10</sup> Of course, as is made clear in the narrative of his Bangor University days in *Neb*, the young Thomas hardly entertained such personal confidence in himself. R. S. Thomas, *Autobiographies*, trans. Jason Walford Davies (London: Dent, 1997), 36-41.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Bourgeois’ being Thomas’s own definition of himself during the early Manafon period. See ‘An Interview with R. S. Thomas’, *The Black and White Supplement*, March (1981) 20, and also ‘Former Paths’, in *Autobiographies*, 11.



as Housman's often abstruse rapport with his Shropshire Lad, and is as psychologically intricate as Hardy's relationship to his Wessex poems.<sup>12</sup> The early Prytherch verses are no reworked 'Georgian sham-pastoral'—quoting Cyril Connolly's dismissive and in my view mistaken comment on *A Shropshire Lad*<sup>13</sup>—but point instead to the elusive and unsettled nature of our perceptual categorizing. 'Self' and 'nature' may occasionally establish a *form* of union (for example, the 'crude tapestry' of landscape 'under the jealous heavens' in 'A Priest to his People', *SF*, 29, which, despite its bewildering 'indifference' is nevertheless powerful enough to compel the poet's gaze) yet more often than not the thematic keynote is one of destabilizing self-alienation. As Patrick Crotty remarks, the stylistic manoeuvre of 'A Peasant' and many of the other Prytherch poems—Thomas's continual employment, for example, of 'personal pronouns with indeterminate or shifting referents'<sup>14</sup>—recall Wordsworth's unmasking in *Lyrical Ballads* of 'the prejudices of his readers by cunningly playing Augustan notions of sensibility off against his own radically democratic attitude'.<sup>15</sup> The overall effect of this is to provoke the reader to an evaluation of *ourselves* in addition to, and concurrent with,

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<sup>12</sup> John Paul Riquelme, 'The modernity of Thomas Hardy's poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Hardy*, ed. Dale Kramer (Cambridge: C. U. P., 2003), 204-14, describes Hardy's Wessex poems as often turning on 'self-implicating tendencies'. It is arguable that a similar desire to criticise and evaluate the self is also discernible in the Prytherch poems. John Bayley, in his book-length study of Housman, writes: 'The durability of Housman's poems, which may increasingly be recognized by a new generation of formalists and of poets concerned with the uses of regularity, depends on combinations of factors which come with time to seem increasingly complex. What gives a shiver [...] is not only the strange mixture of pathos with what is pleased and sardonic, but a touch of irony, even of parody, in the self-presentation. Personality is present, not as style but in addition to style'. *Housman's Poems* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 12. As far as I am aware, no critic has yet examined the similarities between the 'pastoral' verses of Housman and Thomas, but the 'play of reference and image [...] and the felt change of consciousness' discernible in the former poet's work according to Bayley, 107, would provide a preliminary methodology for so doing.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Bayley, 114. Cf. John Carey's remarkably ill-natured review of *Pietà* in *The New Statesman*, 17<sup>th</sup> June, 1966: '*Pietà* is the seventh collection and nothing has changed. Iago Prytherch still wrings Swedes from the barren soil and Mr. Thomas wrings poems from the fruitful Prytherch, wagging his head the while, as yet another Welshman makes off for the bright lights. Like Ambridge and wholemeal bread, Mr. Thomas is a purveyor of the English agrarian dream [...] his reputation thrives on the misapprehension that to be really real you have to write about muck-heaps and mangel-wurzels, though they are as familiar to most of us as knights in armour'.

<sup>14</sup> "Extraordinary Man of the Bald Welsh Hills", 22.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 22. Geoffrey H. Hartman in his paper 'Words, Wish, Worth: Wordsworth', sees the term 'lyrical ballad' itself as indicative of 'excess of voice-feeling over the articulate word. The "power in sound" is the severe music of the signifier or of an inward echoing that is both intensely human and ghostly'. *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Seabury, 1979), 190.

our comprehension of Thomas's famous protagonist.<sup>16</sup>

When God 'unambiguously' appears, as it were, in the collection's ninth poem, 'The Question' (*SF*, 15), the three rhetorical questions tendered in the first stanza provide, in powerfully abbreviated form, an explicitly theological articulation of the previous poems' concerns with fluctuating relations of identity, explanation and difference:

Who is skilled to read  
 The strange epitaph of the salt weed  
 Scrawled on our shores? Who can make plain  
 The thin, dark characters of rain,  
 Or the hushed speech of wind and star  
 In the deep-throated fir?

The diction of writing or inscription—'read', 'epitaph', 'scrawled', 'characters'—is strengthened by the locutionary verb 'hushed' and its continuation with the compound 'deep-throated' to foreground the governing trope of the stanza as landscape as text or 'utterance'.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ben Astley in 'Iago Prytherch and the Rejection of Western Metaphysics', in *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays* 5 (1999), 101-14, sees Prytherch as exemplifying 'anti-rational existence' and interprets the description of the frightening vacancy of his mind as 'the absolute reversal of Descartes's "cogito ergo sum"'. 105. This is because Thomas's theology, in Astley's view, is 'anti-intellectual' and 'pre-rational' and in order to encapsulate this, 'Thomas creates a composite peasant who also acts as an antithesis of himself— Iago Prytherch'. 104. Astley's whole argument is therefore premised, as he himself says, on an assumption that Thomas 'was in bondage' to 'Western metaphysics' and 'the philosophical traditions that he had been immersed in'. 101, 103. The problem with this reading is that Astley nowhere points out that ontological-linguistic 'negativity' is as much a part of 'Western metaphysics' as 'positivity', and that the Bible itself is imbued with images of 'deific darkness' which only 'mean' with reference to their antonyms. As always when interpreting the religious poetry of Thomas, one must be especially vigilant not to ignore the theological subtlety of much of the 'orthodox' religious thinking in which he was professionally steeped. The second part of Astley's earlier paper, "'Somewhere Between Faith and Doubt": R. S. Thomas and the Poetry of Faith Deconstructed', in *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays* 4 (1998), 74-93, attempts to evaluate Thomas's religious verse using a Derridean paradigm. Astley's thesis here is that Thomas's 'poetry of [Derridean] aporia [...] creates a place beyond the philosophical doubts of reason, and within this space locates a God beyond linguistic categorization [...] This poetry becomes the clearest articulation of God's illogical and irrational relationship to the world, a poetry beyond concrete meaning'. 92.

<sup>17</sup>This foreshadows Thomas's conceit in the Hoffman review of the poet as 'extractor' of meaning. R. S. Thomas, review of *Barbarous Knowledge*, in *Critical Quarterly*, 9: 12 (1967), 381.

The seemingly ‘unadorned’ physicality of the world (the weeds, the rain, the wind) itself necessitates interpretation—is, in a sense, hermeneutically padlocked until the observer’s eye comes to fall upon it—which implies in turn competing modalities of perception and therefore the complexity of even the ‘commonplace’. Wind, rain, weeds and even stars (that favourite symbol of non-transience from Plato to Plath, and both Kant and Keats) depend for their ontic status on the existence of an *observer*; thus, the stanza seems to assert that ‘reality’ can *only* be apprehended through the aperture of subjective experience

The tense change in the second and final stanza, leads us to expect some sort of solution to the epistemological interrogations raised within the first:

Was not this the voice that lulled  
 Job’s seething mind to a still calm,  
 Yet tossed his heart to the racked world?

The ‘voice’ appealed to, however, although providing Job with the succour of listening to him is, at the same instant, committed to wrenching from him any momentarily acquired emotional serenity. The interpretative crux of the poem is therefore the binarism constructed by the juxtaposition of ‘heart’ and ‘mind’. For example, are we supposed to celebrate or vilify God’s ostensible apathy toward the psychological suffering of His creation, whilst simultaneously appreciating His apparent benevolence in acknowledging that we *are* suffering?<sup>18</sup> Or,

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<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to reflect that Thomas may have been thinking of Yeats’s ‘The Four Ages of Man’ when writing ‘The Question’, as Yeats too contrasts the ‘mind’ and the ‘heart’ before providing a resolution, of sorts, in his final couplet. The poem was first published in *Parnell’s Funeral and Other Poems* of 1935 and is also similar to Thomas’s in that it uses highly compressed language to proceed through imagistic juxtaposition: ‘He with body waged a fight/ But body won; it walks upright.// Then he struggled with the heart;/ Innocence and peace depart.// Then he struggled with the mind;/ His proud heart he left behind.// Now his wars on God begin;/ At stroke of midnight God shall win’. *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Dent, 1990), 338. The trope of Job as ‘loquacious’ sufferer returns in the much later poem, ‘At It’, in *Frequencies*, where he fulminates at God, ‘with the eloquence/ of the abused heart’. This is another interesting contrast, perhaps suggesting the Augustinian understanding of the Fall as ‘felix culpa’ or ‘happy event’ for, without it, man could not have experienced the grace of the Incarnation.

alternatively, is the poem suggesting that we are frightened, despite God's benign reassurances, of existential commitment?<sup>19</sup>

The questions posed by the text, however, do not appear to be decisively answered—are indeed countered by another question, 'Was not this'...—but it does not follow from this that the poem may only be appropriated as lugubrious, existential pondering. The polyphony of responses conveyed within the poem, point us not only to a reformulation of the *actual* question (which may be rephrased as the 'standard', theological inquiry: 'What is the nature of this God who has given us both joy and suffering?') but, more importantly, the theological presuppositions *entrenched* within the question itself. Arguably, the poet of Job is more interested in exploring our *responses* to God than in probing the moral complexities of physical and mental anguish. Furthermore, in his depictions of a sometimes (apparently) splenetic and sometimes amenable deity, the poet of Job is not using a dramatically different theistic paradigm to that found elsewhere within the Scriptures.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in Thomas's poem, the metaphors compel us to 'deconstruct' our religious archetypes. They force us to an evaluation of what encouraged the assemblage of those archetypes in the first instance and, as result of this, the 'questioning' referred to in the poem becomes dynamically twofold: *why* is there an

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<sup>19</sup> Susannah Ticciati in *Job and the Disruption of Identity: Reading Beyond Barth* (London: T & T Clarke International, 2005), argues that the Book of Job should be comprehended as an exploration of the transformation of the self before God rather than an investigation into the problem of evil. For example: 'By means of [...] self-examination Job enters into critical engagement with the otherness he finds at the heart of his own integrity- an otherness he discovers in the Whirlwind speeches to be embodied in other creaturely singulars. This engagement ushers Job into a movement which disrupts not only his own identity but also the world he inhabits'. 115. See also Alison Lo, *Job 28 as Rhetoric: An Analysis of Job 28 in the Context of Job 22-31* (Leiden: Brill, 2003) which argues, using the methodologies of rhetorical criticism, that 'Job's viewpoint, emotion and use of language do not necessarily remain constant all the way through the story' and further, in continuation of this: 'The author reveals his evaluation viewpoints to the audience by using the strategy of "from less to more adequate perspectives," which first exposes the inadequacy of the friends' perspective (the limit of theodicies) through Job's arguments from contradictory experience of reality, and then proceeds to disclose the inadequacy of Job's perspective (his misconceptions of God) through God's correction and instruction in the whirlwind. This is how the audience is directed from less adequate to more adequate perspectives throughout the book.' 15; 20. Both these studies emphasize the conflictive as opposed to rhetorically homogenous nature of the text and therefore contain at their analytical centre a reading of the Book of Job's theodicy as essentially *confrontational*. An exegetical approach that stresses theology's need to confront itself—that is, theology's inbuilt preconceptions—can yield much of interest in an evaluation of Thomas.

<sup>20</sup> For more on the 'intertextual' nature of the Book of Job, stressing its affinity with other Old Testament writing, see Bruce Zuckerman, *Job the Silent: A Study in Historical Counterpoint* (Oxford: O. U. P., 1991), esp. chapter 8.

assumption that God must be somehow lacking in magnanimity if His creation suffers, and *why* do we almost instinctively leap to the inference that the facts of suffering must entail divine indifference? In ‘The Question’, it would seem, Thomas is inducing us to locate and then *undermine* the theologically limiting descriptions we use for God; therefore, in an important sense, the poem ultimately encourages us to ‘revisit’ our theological paradigms. As soon as we say ‘God is all loving’ to the *exclusion* of contrary theological paradigms, we entangle ourselves within a Gordian knot of contradiction. If the ascription ‘God is all loving’ were simply true by *itself*, then clearly one would then either have to deny that evil does exist or, alternatively, one would have to redefine one’s theology to posit a God similar to the young Joyce’s withdrawn and unapproachable deity, blithely unconcerned with humanity’s welfare, refined out of existence and paring his fingernails. What we should do instead, the poem appears to argue, is aim for an epistemological *wholeness* where theological ‘inconsistency’ itself provides the scaffolding *for*, as well as content *of*, our religious thinking.

This concentrated attentiveness upon what we could summarize as ‘taxonomies of description’ is also noticeable in ‘The Mistress’ (*SF*, 21). In this poem the ‘excessive’ defamiliarisation (‘why did she dress/ Green sap with sinew, fibre and thigh and thigh?’), as well as the rhythmical and imagistic complexity of the Audenesque ending (‘suddenly sunder/ dreamer from dream in a mute surrender?’), again suggest a type of ‘estrangement’ between our expectations of ‘landscape’ poetry and the nature of observation itself. A similar leitmotif may also be detected within the overtly sexual diction of ‘Song’:

We, who are men, how shall we know

Earth’s ecstasy, who feels the plough

Probing her womb,

And after, the sweet gestation

And the year's care for her condition?  
 We, who have forgotten, so long ago  
 It happened, our own orgasm,  
 When the wind mixed with our limbs  
 And the sun had suck at our bosom;  
 We, who have affected the livery  
 Of the time's prudery,  
 How shall we quicken again  
 To the lust and thrust of the sun  
 And the seedling rain? (SF, 23)

This remarkable poem, one not often referred to in the secondary literature,<sup>21</sup> can of course be approached as a variation of the 'man as separated from nature' viewpoint and therefore as an argument for prelapsarian 'wholesomeness'. As the poem progresses, however, it becomes obvious that its ornate personifications do not merely foreground man's sought after 'impregnation' by nature. If the poem, despite its complicated luxuriance of metaphor, is simply referring to man as Rousseauan 'noble savage' and is thus essentially sermonizing in its rhetorical impulse, then it is difficult to explain the *discordant* correlation between the descriptions of nature in the poem's opening and closing lines. 'Ecstasy' and 'lust' clearly do not signify the same emotion and, as a result of their referential 'antagonism', on reaching the end of the poem we are encouraged to retrace our interpretative steps and consider again the poem's governing conceit (from a perfunctory reading, Earth as 'earth-mother'). Thus, the poem seems to focus on our psychological need to disclose *similitude* between perceptions.

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<sup>21</sup> In a footnote Christopher Morgan mentions that the poem provides, 'Evidence of Thomas's view of a naturally erotic relation of humanity to nature' (*R. S. Thomas: Identity, Environment, and Deity*, 142). This would appear true enough, but Morgan does not actually specify the characteristics of the eroticism presented; therefore, he does not explain why the poet would wish to accentuate them.

Indeed, the title itself would seem indicative of slippage between what Barthes calls the *lisible* and *scriptible* dimensions of a text<sup>22</sup>—the former designating the writer’s dependence upon literary convention and the latter experimentation or a contravening of traditional ‘rules’—for ‘song’ of course implies ‘sonnet’ and therefore conveys suggestions of lovelorn pastoralism, but Thomas, whilst using the established 14 line structure in the poem and ‘rustic’ vocabulary, is evidently not bestowing a straightforward paean to the natural world.<sup>23</sup> The poem, therefore, seems to destabilize its own controlling metaphor and, in that sense, it can be interpreted as another text which foregrounds perceptual ambiguity.

Wallace Stevens wrote that poetry was a ‘satisfying of the desire for resemblance’,<sup>24</sup> his definition referring both to the ‘transitory’ nature of metaphor (desire, by definition, is a momentary emotion) and metaphor’s enticing illusion of permanence. (The image of the poet ‘capturing’ things tells us a great deal about our need to see ‘objective’ correlations between entities.) Thomas too, in many of the poems in *The Stones of the Field*, appears to be engaged in redeploying his language to dispute its own concreteness. Turning to the well-known ‘Country Church’ (*Manafon*) (*SF*, 24), there is a sense in which the somatic again gives way to the allusional but the allusional, by referring back to the somatic, is able to provide descriptive ‘homogeneity’. The initial description of St. Michael’s as ‘built from the river stone’ at once suggests permanence, yet ‘literality’ is immediately undercut by the poem’s first metaphor, ‘brittle with light’, and the extended simile: ‘as though a breath could shatter/ Its

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<sup>22</sup> See *Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Ann Jefferson and David Robey (London: Batsford, 1982), 100.

<sup>23</sup> Judith Haber’s *Pastoral and the Poetics of Self-Contradiction: Theocritus to Marvell* (Cambridge: C. U. P., 1994) argues that a dominant strain of ‘antipastoralism’ has always been discernible in pastoral poetry and that even classic pastoral verse comprised ‘a mode that worked insistently against itself, problematizing both its own definition and stable definitions within its texts; from the beginning of the genre, presence, continuity, and consolation have been as seen as related to—indeed as dependent on—absence, discontinuity and loss.’ 1. Haber sees this aspect of the genre as reaching its thematic apotheosis with the Mower poems of Marvell which, she says, ‘so insistently magnifies these elements [of the antithetical] and so consistently suppresses their opposites, that the ideals we traditionally associate with the pastoral seem irretrievably lost.’ 98. It can certainly be argued that many of Thomas’s early verses are similarly concerned with challenging the ‘accepted’ understanding of pastoral poetry.

<sup>24</sup> Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Random House, 1951), 54.

slender frame'. The opening quatrain, therefore, generates an overall impression of flimsiness and transience. Moreover, as Justin Wintle points out, the story of St. Michael's as constructed from stone taken from the Rhiw is a legend, not a 'fact', and so, to some extent, the poem is built on the prior knowledge that the narrative sustaining it may indeed be 'false'.<sup>25</sup>

This emphasis on fragility, however, is somewhat obviated by the stark beginning to the second quatrain, 'It stands yet'; hence, there seems to be what we could term an 'aesthetic of compromise' providing a thematic substructure to the poem's atmosphere of incorporeity. Lexical chains ('stands', 'stone', 'fashioned') are destabilized by psychological, if not straightforwardly verbal, antonyms ('shatter', 'slender', 'limpid'), so that once more the dominant chords of the poetry seem to resonate with a consciousness determined to disrupt itself as the 'regulating' voice of the text. There is, in 'Country Church' (*Manafon*), a strong impression of Keatsian 'negative capability' (in the sense of there being 'uncertainties, mysteries, doubts'). The intertwining metaphors and criss-crossing sibilance emphasize that the 'conflictive' ideas within the poem are thematically interpenetrative. In fact, one of the ways to understand the poem is to 'reverse' a 'preliminary' reading of the final lines and by so doing transform the negative of 'no friendly God' into a 'double negative'. It may well be that Thomas is actually *commending* God for allowing the grasses to become part of the 'fabric' of the church—God here *is* 'friendly'—for the 'natural' world, as Thomas certainly believed anyway, is not merely an adjunct to the human world but an indispensable part of it: we must remember that we are '*in league with the stones of the field*' as the quotation from Job used as an epigraph for the collection tells us. Therefore, the poem is perhaps arguing that religion and nature form a 'natural' synthesis; God desires our theology to embrace *all* creation—'And God is the weight that bends the bough/ Of the young tree gently as spring snow', as Thomas describes his deity in the other poem of the volume entitled 'Song' (*SF*, 37)—and so the

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<sup>25</sup> Justin Wintle, *Furious Interiors: Wales, R. S. Thomas and God* (London: Harper Collins, 1996), 167.



withdrawal of God's 'cautioning' is to be celebrated rather than disparaged. The sense of *incongruity* entailed by the encroaching 'fescue' incites us to reevaluate the most 'obvious' themes of the poem ('religion versus nature'/ 'man's indifference to religion') and therefore encourages us also to *synthesize* the poem's competing images. As Thomas would later say in his 1963 lecture, 'Words and the Poet', 'the more one woos words, the more desperately in love with them one grows, the more coquettish and refractory they become',<sup>26</sup> and in 'Country Church' (*Manafon*), the poet seems considerably aware of how recalcitrant to 'definitive' interpretation a text, or a description within a text, may actually be. To change the metaphor, the linguistic and intellectual machinery of the poem must, by necessity, engage many different gears and mechanisms in order to function at all, and to disregard this is to fall straight into the interpretative trap of assuming the priority of a *single* subject-term ('heart', 'mind', 'church') at the expense of exegetical variation.

'Spring Equinox' (*SF*, 48), the final poem in the collection, can also be read as a text concerned with the contention that observation and taxonomy are an amalgam of inherently 'discordant' elements. Here, a Wordsworthian gloss may be used to provide an immediate foothold for exegesis. Thomas, in the Introduction to his 1971 selection of Wordsworth's poetry, quotes from 'Tintern Abbey' ('For I have learned to look on nature [...] hearing/ often-times the still, sad music of humanity' [...] 'a presence that disturbs me with the joy/ of elevated thoughts') to show 'the inadequacy of the description of him [Wordsworth] as a nature poet'.<sup>27</sup> Later in the same piece, Thomas draws attention to how Wordsworth 'was very consciously reacting against the inflated and verbose style of the eighteenth century'.<sup>28</sup> This dual concern

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<sup>26</sup> R. S. Thomas: *Selected Prose*, 82.

<sup>27</sup> R. S. Thomas, Introduction to *A Choice of Wordsworth's Verse* (London: Faber, 1971), 12.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 18. Thomas's analysis here appears to chime with several more recent readings of the poem. Geoffrey H. Hartman, for instance, in *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* (London: Methuen, 1987), writes that in 'Tintern Abbey': 'Nature is second best, a substitute heaven; and the object of Wordsworth's nature poems is not nature but the "one dear Presence" lost yet perhaps recoverable— like Eurydice. His moving beyond the eye [...] is therefore tantamount to making nature disappear; collapsing it into the cache he is seeking. And often, rather than be deceived again—by "mother" Nature this time—he cultivates an ideal blindness not unlike that of the abstract sciences'. 27. See also: William H. Galperin, *Revision and Authority in Wordsworth: The Interpretation of a*

with perceptions of nature and the workings of language is also clearly discernible via the opening simile in ‘Spring Equinox’:

Do not say, referring to the sun,  
 ‘Its journey northward has begun,’  
 As though it were a bird, annually migrating,  
 That now returns to build in the rich trees  
 Its nest of golden grass.

The diminution of the controlling image here points to a ‘decentering’ of our notions of perceptual equivalence and dependability. As Wynn Thomas comments, ‘the poem is very much about the different pictures of the world that lurk behind our “factual” descriptions of it’.<sup>29</sup> This is certainly true, but perhaps more needs to be said regarding the *specific* nature of metaphor as presented in ‘Spring Equinox’, for we must also recognize that ‘Spring Equinox’ is a successful poem about, ostensibly, the characteristics of unsuccessful description. The ‘failed’ descriptions, in other words, are actually efficacious in conveying their own referential ‘collapse’—they are *indispensible* to the poem, not ornamental afterthoughts or mere appendages to it—so the purportedly anaemic metaphors result in the transmission of a strong impression of stubborn good health. Not only that, but the final line, ‘“We are turning towards

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*Career* (Philadelphia: U. of Pennsylvania P., 1989): ‘What the poem demonstrates is the existence of a poetical self, and with it, a society of selves to whom the poet can be true simply by speaking. Disinclined to hide from his audience, Wordsworth moves instead to full expression in this poem, whose alleged “balance” of negative and positive forces is grounded in a still larger synthesis’, 80; George H. Gilpin, ‘In Wordsworth’s English Gardens’, in *Critical Essays on William Wordsworth*, ed. George H. Gilpin (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990): ‘He [Wordsworth] is already asserting a sublimity of mind over a sublimity of nature, and to permit this focus aesthetic distance from a real landscape is upheld assiduously in the poem to stifle demands for details from readers with the prevailing eighteenth-century taste for picturesque effects’, 291; Antony Easthope, *Wordsworth Now and Then: Romanticism and Contemporary Culture* (Buckingham: Open U. P., 1993), ‘For Wordsworth the landscape comes as a direct personal experience— it is to be his landscape perceived by his specifically situated eye [...] and recalled from his memory of it [...] The self represented is apparently beyond or outside the social formation. In symbolic consistency with this, the natural world is valued in so far as it seems to escape human control’, 12.

<sup>29</sup> ‘R. S. Thomas: War Poet’, 94.

the sun's indifferent ray" ' is, despite the poet's sardonic self-annulment ("therefore be brief"), another carefully wrought personification; therefore, the concluding image of the *volume* is one which stresses yet again the *impossibility* of evading metaphorical depictions of reality. What is happening in 'Spring Equinox', as is the case with many other poems within *The Stones of the Field*, is a counter-positioning between conflictive descriptions of an object (in this case, the sun), showing that *both* modalities are necessary to enable any sort of 'hold' to be fastened on to the object described.

In Thomas's first collection, therefore, we can discern a powerful emphasis upon the dynamic interconnection between the *observer's* constructions of reality and the manner in which description is reliant upon 'incompatible' metaphors. Turning to *An Acre of Land*, there are several texts which appear to continue this general dialectic. The 'Prytherch' poems 'The Gap in the Hedge' (*AL*, 15), 'The Hill Farmer Speaks' (*AL*, 17), 'Enigma' (*AL*, 31), and 'The Labourer' (*AL*, 32), are all dependent for their evocative power on the play of opposing perceptual attitudes, whilst 'Alun Lewis' (*AL*, 25) and 'Song' (*AL*, 27) use the motif of rain to once more coerce the reader toward perspectival reconsideration of a seemingly straightforward natural occurrence. In 'Saint Antony' (*AL*, 33), the famous Franciscan thaumaturgist is portrayed in the concluding line as 'the prey, the hunter and the wood,' the threefold description here another example of imagistic interplay in order to provide perceptual depth. In 'Maes-Yr-Onnen' (*AL*, 10) the conceit of the grass introduced in 'Country Church' (*Manafon*) is returned to, although in this instance the 'stale piety' of the church's interior—meaning the residue of services attended by the pious congregation—is vigorously contrasted with the practically transcendental clear-sightedness of the poet himself:

Though I describe it stone by stone, the chapel

Left stranded in the hurrying grass,

Painting faithfully the mossed tiles and the tree [...]  
 You cannot hear as I, incredulous, heard  
 Up in the rafters, where the bell should ring,  
 The wild, sweet singing of Rhiannon's birds.<sup>30</sup>

Many of the Manafon and Eglwys-fach poems can be interpreted as an argument against what the Narrator in *The Minister* describes as 'playing the old anthropomorphic game'; that is, our desire to 'project' reality, to impose a subjective meaning *on* reality, rather than accurately *observing*. This idea may be glossed with reference to Wordsworth's 'Expostulation and Reply':

The eye— it cannot choose but see;  
 We cannot bid the ear be still;  
 Our bodies feel, where'er they be,  
 Against or with our will.

Nor less I deem that there are Powers  
 Which of themselves our minds impress;  
 That we can feed this mind of ours  
 In a wise passiveness.

In *The Minister*, Thomas seems to foreground a type of perception akin to that 'wise passiveness' to which Wordsworth refers. Indeed, Elias Morgan's defeat is a consequence of

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<sup>30</sup> For the cultural significance of bird imagery in general and the particular significance of 'Rhiannon's birds' in Thomas, see Jason Walford Davies, '“Thick Ambush of Shadows”: Allusions to Welsh Literature in the work of R. S. Thomas', in *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays*, 1 (1995), 100; 116-118.

his naïve objective to *impose* a particular vision of morality and religion onto the outwardly harsh, yet essentially decent, members of his congregation. In *The Minister* varying perspectives, whether religious, moral or societal, are what generate the drama. Although Morgan is demonstrably culpable in his own collapse, part of the blame must also lie with the farmers who ‘chose their pastors as they chose their horses/ For hard work’ (*M*, 10). If Morgan will not listen to the hillmen, neither will they listen to him, for both parties are effectively concerned with defining the other in terms of what is *desired* rather than what is really there. *The Minister*, therefore, may ultimately be understood as a powerful dramatization of the ways in which intellect distorts perception, and perception distorts intellect.

‘A Person from Porlock’ (*SYT*, 103) in the ‘Later Poems’ section of *Song at the Year’s Turning*, shows that Thomas continued to be fascinated with the thorny nature of definitions and the refractory temperament of language whilst at Eglwys-fach. This poem uses Coleridge’s infamous encounter with his unwanted guest to tender a kind of proto-post-modernist argument that all-inclusive clarity within language is never entirely possible. Moreover, identity here is fractured; the poet seeks ‘contact with his lost self’ but ‘the mind’s gloom’ forbids existential completeness whilst the possibility of locating firm correlations between signifier and signified is described as ‘the long torture of delayed birth’. Thus, deciphering the poem as concerned not only with the nature of aesthetic inspiration but also as a portrayal of the limitations of language when faced with the transcendental, we may feel compelled to argue that the poem concerns the ‘gaps’ between our desire to achieve ‘successful’ meaning and the accompanying acknowledgement that meaning will always elude our grasp.<sup>31</sup> However, to regard ‘A Person from Porlock’ as a poem *purely* about linguistic failure is to ignore the poem’s position within the volume. ‘Coleridge’ (*SYT*, 101), for example, placed two poems before ‘A Person from Porlock,’ employs as its thematic hinge the notion of Coleridge’s ‘vain philosophy’—

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<sup>31</sup> As mentioned in chapter 1, William V. Davis has written extensively on Thomas’s deity as a ‘God of the gaps’, using a paradigm of Arnoldian and Shavian scepticism as an exegetical rallying point for his discussion.

presumably a reference to his ‘Adamic’ idea that words may embody rather than merely ‘take the place of’ things<sup>32</sup>—to suggest instead that nature (‘the shrill voices from the sea’) repels our attempts at taxonomy. Nevertheless, it would be mistaken to assume from this that Thomas is compounding the negative or ‘apophatic’ view of language presented in ‘A Person from Porlock’, for the two poems must clearly be viewed as forming an imaginative symbiosis, within which attention is focused not so much on language’s referential failure, as on the realization that what is actually at fault are the ways in which we *perceive* reality and therefore our *expectations* of language. It does not follow that merely because we cannot ‘capture’ the essence of a subject in a solitary word or phrase, the essence of whatever we are considering cannot be arrested in a different manner, a position made explicit in ‘Autumn on the Land’ (SYT, 106) which concludes:

You must revise

Your bland philosophy of nature, earth

Has of itself no power to make men wise.

Here, understanding the natural world and, by extension, understanding the nature of selfhood and/ or divinity, once more entails perceptual *renewal*, a crucial theme in much of the Manafon and Eglwys-fach poetry and one clearly detectable within *Poetry for Supper*, the first Eglwys-fach collection proper. It is, of course, a critical commonplace to observe that Thomas’s poetry from the 1970s onward became more obviously ‘metaphysical’ or ‘philosophical’, but it is not

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<sup>32</sup> See for example Coleridge’s letter to William Godwin, September 22, 1800: ‘I wish you to *philosophize* Horn Tookes system, and to solve the great Questions... Is *thinking* impossible without arbitrary signs? &—how far is the word “arbitrary” a misnomer? Are not words &c parts & germinations of the Plant? And what is the law of their Growth? —In something of this order I would endeavour to destroy the old antithesis of *Words & Things*, elevating, as it were, words into Things, & living Things too’. Cited in William Keach, ‘Romanticism and language’, in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. Stuart Curran (Cambridge: C. U. P., 1993), 110.

often acknowledged that the early poetry too contains much which could be described in a comparable manner, with several poems from the late 1950s showing a fascination with the relationships between epistemology, ontology, and language.

The opening poem of *Poetry for Supper*, 'Border Blues' (*PS*, 9-13), contains a polyphony of voices—is itself a 'volley of voices', as the speaker describes the somewhat sinister 'ladies from the council houses' in the poem's second section—with the poem's shifting thematic reference points and structural and imagistic fluctuations, suggestive of dialectical and ontological multiplicity.<sup>33</sup> 'The Letter' (*PS*, 26) is concerned with the impermanence of words and the contrasting temperament of emotion and intellect ('And laying aside the pen, dipped/ Not in tears' volatile liquid/ But in black ink of the heart's well') whilst 'The View from the Window' (*PS*, 27) uses the extended metaphor of painting to argue that we habitually *refuse* to see variation in nature, preferring instead to inflict an unambiguous, metaphysically unalterable interpretation onto our surroundings:

All through history  
 The great brush has not rested,  
 Nor the paint dried; yet what eye,  
 Looking coolly, or, as we now,  
 Through the tears' lenses, ever saw  
 This work and it was not finished?

'The Journey' (*PS*, 30) continues this accentuation of the metaphysically and therefore

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<sup>33</sup> Tony Brown has argued that 'Border Blues', 'utilizes the fragmented, multi-voiced technique of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. As in Eliot's poem, echoes from the past, from a time when cultural values were coherent and personal identity secure, resound in the consciousness of the protagonist, as he wanders alone through a world in which coherence and continuity have been replaced by fragmentation, spirituality by materialism and triviality'. *R.S. Thomas: Writers of Wales*, 60.

epistemologically multifaceted, and is Thomas's first poem overtly to engage the supposed juxtaposition between 'faith' and 'reason'.<sup>34</sup> The poem employs as its thematic focal point the long-established conceit of life as a process of travelling and therefore, it is hoped, arrival and discovery, but its connective tissue, both theologically and imagistically, is the further conceit that we are led astray from our final destination by a consuming desire to impose 'definitions' in order to make sense of religious consciousness and consciousness of religion:

And if you go up that way, you will meet with a man,

Leading a horse, whose eyes declare:

There is no God. Take no notice [...]

The road runs on

With many turnings towards the tall

Tree to which the believer is nailed.

The 'many turnings' are what in the Prytherch poem 'Green Categories' (*PS*, 19) is additionally described as the Kantian 'War of antinomies', those logical contradictions in reasoning ascertained by Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* as a necessary consequence of *any* attempt to conceptualize the nature of transcendent reality.<sup>35</sup> However, it is important to also realize that contradiction is not cognate with meaninglessness, for contradiction discloses *fallacious* reasoning and therefore performs the important task of illuminating argumentative terminologies and the intellectual practices implanted within them. Far from being

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<sup>34</sup> A case could be made, of course, that in Thomas's distinctive onto-theology 'faith' and 'reason' can never be completely separated. See for example, D. Z. Phillips, *R. S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 123-4: 'If knowing God were a matter of intellectual assent, it ought to be possible to say, "I believe in God", without this having any effect whatever on one's life. But this would not correspond to anything akin to religious belief [...] Trying to argue for the existence of God by means of something like the argument from design seems fruitless. It does not bring one any nearer to God'.

<sup>35</sup> Raymond Garlick and H. J. Savill have both noted that the concluding line of 'Green Categories' is a clear allusion to the well-known final sentence of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. See Crotty, "Extraordinary Man of the Bald Welsh Hills", 42, n.23.



epistemically redundant, ‘contradictory’ thought processes direct us to *fresh* epistemic paradigms and thus should be used to *channel* thought rather than merely abrogate it. To prefer ‘the easier rhythms of the heart/ To the mind’s scansion’ (‘Death of a Poet’, *PS*, 31), is to elevate emotional commitment above intellectual comprehension and is, in a sense, an example of cognitive laziness—the religious thinker, whether his theology be written in studious prose or the more capricious language of poetry, has nevertheless a responsibility to explain the particular conception of God he entertains. It is hard to believe that Thomas is therefore simply advocating withdrawal into the type of epistemic ‘silence’ traditionally associated with the ‘mystical’,<sup>36</sup> as to do so would imply that he regards onto-theological statements as non-cognitive and thus religious poetry itself as an epistemically vacuous language, a position which clearly does not coalesce with his many pronouncements, both in poetry and prose, to the contrary.<sup>37</sup> In the ‘religious’ poems of *Poetry for Supper*, indeed, the accent is most

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<sup>36</sup> J. M. Cohen includes ‘The Muck Farmer’ and ‘Green Categories’ from *Poetry for Supper* in his somewhat idiosyncratic *The Rider Book of Mystical Verse* (London: Rider & Company, 1983), 16, 52. The justification for this is that in these poems Thomas is writing ‘of the deplorable condition of man’ through insights which (as Cohen defines ‘mysticism’) surpass ‘logical comprehension’ and transport ‘moments of vision’. The jacket note tells us that, ‘As a young man J. M. Cohen joined the Theosophical Society [...] After participating in contemporary meditation movements he became, in his seventies, a Buddhist’, biographical details which perhaps go some way toward explaining Cohen’s misreading of Thomas’s purpose in these two poems. In any event, it is far from certain that ‘mysticism’ *does* entail this type of non-verbal and fundamentally ‘illogical’ transcendence. As several contemporary writers on the ‘mystical’ have endeavoured to prove, ‘mystical’ theology may be largely construed as a subsidiary dialectic of classical philosophical theism, the point of divergence located in not so much the *epistemology* of our responses to a deity, but rather in the *type* of language we use to communicate a deity’s metaphysical attributes. For a general overview of the historical relationship between ‘mystical spirituality’ and ‘classical theology’, see Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), esp. chapter 4, where it is argued: ‘apophatic mysticism ought not to be thought of as something undertaken by people who are absorbed by the unutterable *remoteness* of God. On the contrary, apophasis happens because, like Moses and the burning bush, persons have been drawn so *close* to the mystery that they have begun to realize how beautifully, appallingly, heart-breakingly mysterious God really is. In other words, the *absence* to which apophasis conducts one is an absence of any particular thing or item that could satisfy one any longer [...] apophatic speech is *not* a case of there simply not being much to say [...] it might also take the form of an explosion of speech, a carnival of self-subverting discourse, language tripping over itself in paradox or fantastical repetition as it comes undone in the whirlwind of divine superabundance’. 123-4. Emphases in original.

<sup>37</sup> For example: ‘a recurring ideal, I find, is that of simplicity. At times there comes the desire to write with great precision and clarity, words so simple and moving that they bring tears to the eyes, or of you like, as Wordsworth said are “too deep for tears”’ ‘Words and the Poet’, in *Selected Prose*, 83; ‘If there is any contact with an eternal reality I don’t want to limit that reality to personality. It is a bit like Wordsworth’s Fourteenth book of *The Prelude* with his trip up Yr Wyddfa, Snowdon. It seemed to me a type of majestic intellect’. ‘R. S. Thomas at Seventy’, broadcast BBC radio 3, 7<sup>th</sup> December 1983. Quoted in M. J. J. van Buuren, 178; ‘After all what is today’s orthodoxy is only tomorrow’s antiquity, if it comes to that. There’s really no need to bother about that at all. And, in any case, poetry is religion, religion is poetry. The message of the New Testament is poetry. Christ was a poet.

emphatically not laid on the purely emotional. ‘Absolution’ (*PS*, 44), for example, reinforces the argument in ‘The Journey’ and ‘Green Categories’ that we are often so confused by emotion that we mistakenly privilege it over truth (‘seeking what lay/ too close for the mind’s lenses to see’) while the final poem, ‘Epitaph’ (*PS*, 48), makes the unequivocal point that, ‘The poem in the rock and/ The poem in the mind/ Are not one’, thereby suggesting again the poet’s fundamental role as ‘synthesizer’ of apparently discordant actualities.

In the 1961 volume *Tares*, ‘Riposte’ (*T*, 14), a poem structurally similar to ‘Poetry for Supper’ (*PS*, 34), rotates also on the twin themes of our predicative intelligence and the ways in which images are inherently imbued with the characteristic of constant renewal, each image within the poem being dependent on an opposite, or referential antonym, for its evocative power. Here, the controlling metaphorical vehicle is again man’s *perception* of nature, but the tenor fluctuates between the somatic (‘there are things growing/ besides trees in this sweet world’), the psychological (‘Look in the mind, green is showing’), and the verbal (‘Employ nothing; your fault is speech’). Perspectives modulate and sharpen themselves upon the whetstone of predicative incongruity, so that when the opening image of the tree is returned to in the final stanza, it is appropriated with a rejuvenated awareness of how our descriptive modalities *themselves* are pivotal in the discernment of an object’s metaphysical status. This idea is also evident in the well-known second stanza of ‘A Welsh Testament’:

Even God had a Welsh name:

We spoke to him in the old language;

He was to have a peculiar care

For the Welsh people. History showed us

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The new testament is metaphor, the Resurrection is a metaphor; and I feel perfectly within my rights in approaching my whole vocation as a priest and a preacher as one who is to present poetry; and when I preach poetry I am preaching Christianity; when one discusses Christianity one is discussing poetry in its imaginative aspects’. Ormond interview, ‘R. S. Thomas, Priest and Poet’, *Poetry Wales* VII-4 (1972) 53.

He was too big to be nailed to the wall  
 Of a stone chapel, yet still we crammed him  
 Between the boards of a black book. (T, 39)

This may be taken as an additional critique of Protestantism as ‘the adroit castrator/ of art’, as Thomas disparagingly describes Luther’s religion in *The Minister*, yet it is also possible—and arguably more important—to interpret the lines as illustrative of the poet’s continuing concern with the possibilities of definition and, *a fortiori*, with the nature of theological classification or taxonomy. In ‘Siesta’ (T, 24), for example, the mind recoils at its obligation to discern an adequate language with which to conceptualize the divine, yet the pejorative tone of the concluding lines (‘They say it is furnished with tall cloud,/ And habitable by some huge presence/ At whose stature the mind balked’) intimate that Thomas is not commending those who refuse to engage the challenge. A similar disputation is also evident in ‘Alpine’ (T, 44), whose final, parabolic flourish—stressing as it does the centrality of intellectual *recalibration* in intellectual understanding—may be interpreted as a thematic coda for the volume in its entirety:

A sense of smell is of less importance  
 Than a sense of balance, walking on clouds  
 Through holes in which you can see the earth  
 Like a rich man through the eye of a needle.  
 The mind has its own level to find.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Tares* contains several poems contrasting the ‘mind’ with the ‘heart’; for example: ‘Genealogy’ (T, 16); ‘The Face’ (T, 16); ‘The Musician’ (T, 19); ‘Those Others’ (T, 31).

Emphasis on the mind—as opposed to the emotions—as the force which may unite or reconcile mutually incompatible definitions (or ‘antinomies’) is returned to in the third poem of *The Bread of Truth*, ‘Welsh Border’ (BT, 5), where Thomas again argues that ‘The real fight goes on/ In the mind’. A comparable idea is also discernible in the twelfth poem of the volume, ‘The Survivors’ (BT, 19), where the obvious usage in the first two stanzas of the Flood narrative with its affirmative implications of purgation and replenishment, is delicately undercut with the third and final stanza’s depiction of the mariners’ rescue:

From the swell’s rise one of them saw the ruins  
 Of all that sea, where a lean horseman  
 Rode towards them and with a rope  
 Galloped them up on to the curt sand.

Although the men have been liberated, the ‘lean horseman’ is redolent of the horsemen of the Apocalypse (the sense of religious tentativeness is perhaps also aroused by the epithet ‘curt’, suggesting brusqueness or, in a slightly different reading, that which is ephemeral) so that at the poem’s conclusion sanguinity gives way to hesitation and salvific buoyancy is counteracted, if not by scepticism, then at least by some degree of theological misgiving. Again, the interpretative crux is located within our awareness of the ‘space between’ opposition or disjunction. The ‘positive’ collapses into the ‘negative’ and vice versa to foreground through symbiosis the essentially bifocal nature of theological truth itself. Thus, for the religious believer to posit *either* apophatic or cataphatic religious discourse as ‘lexically’ or metaphysically prior to its opposite, is to once again become entrapped by the snares of rhetorical self-cancellation. Thomas’s dexterous manipulation of the Noah myth in ‘The

Survivors' shows that 'singular' theological predication (for example, 'God as absent'; 'prayer as waiting'; 'God as merciful/ merciless'), results in the implosion of one's theological taxonomies; religious paradigms, the poet seems to argue, must be approached through one's awareness of their 'relational,' and not merely 'foundational', epistemological character.<sup>39</sup>

Polyvocality demands rhetorical diversity and figurative variation, and in many of the Eglwys-fach period poems, the language employed often appears to indicate the essential proteanism of *both* secular and religious consciousness. In the nationalist poem 'Welcome' (*BT*, 24), a poem which may also be read as an extension of Thomas's ideas regarding the perceptual basis of metaphysical taxonomy, the trope of truth as 'beyond' language is again brought into play—truth is 'the cold bud of water/ In the hard rock', the figure recalling the earlier 'the poem in the rock/ And the poem in the mind' of 'Epitaph'<sup>40</sup>—but the verse doubles back upon itself between the first and second stanzas ('You can come in,/ You can come a long way;/ We can't stop you' [...] 'there is no way there;/ Past town and factory/ You must travel back') and in so doing may be construed as demonstrative of rhetorical 'telescoping' or as emphasizing the reciprocally *compatible* nature of imagistic 'conflation' and reduction. Again, the stress is upon perspectival duality, leading in turn to an assertion that simplistic, monocular predication, both distorts and falsifies.

Perception and therefore understanding is not a one-dimensional activity and in *Pietà*, the final Eglwys-fach volume, there are several poems which exhibit at their conceptual axis the notion of 'singular' definitions as not only epistemically vacuous but metaphysically threadbare.<sup>41</sup> 'Within Sound of the Sea' (*P*, 13) contrasts 'book-learning', that is, the

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<sup>39</sup> In Part Three of his exceptionally interesting *Faith after Foundationalism* (London: Routledge, 1988), D. Z. Phillips discusses at some length the various ways in which theology has rejected foundationalist cognitivism as a consequence of Wittgenstein's classification of theology as 'grammar'. Phillips is arguably Wittgenstein's most incisive commentator in this area, and it is therefore surprising that 'Wittgensteinian' readings do not appear in any detail in his study of Thomas.

<sup>40</sup> The lines are also reminiscent of, 'The poem shut,/Uneasy fossil,/In the mind's rock', in 'Poet's Address to the Businessmen', (*T*, 29).

<sup>41</sup> The title itself is suggestive of 'polyvocality', for 'pietà' is a synthesis of 'pity' and 'piety'.

lexicographer's formalized classifications of an object or entity, to non-denotative description. In this poem, truth is located behind 'the print's bars', and reading is an activity self-consciously aware of itself as performative:

Am I wise now,  
 With all this pain in the air,  
 To keep to my room, reading perhaps  
 Of that being whose will is our peace?

The theological amorphousness of the final line suggest that Thomas is reluctant to ascribe 'settled' metaphysical features to his deity, but it does not follow from this that the deity referred to is either beyond meaningful description or is mere will-o'-the-wisp of the imagination. What is under attack is not the truth of theism itself, but rather our craving to padlock theistic descriptions within a *solitary* predicate, 'God is...', instead of 'cancelling the copula', so to speak, and recognizing that truth lies *between* the polarities of apophatic and cataphatic discourse. In the collection's title poem, for instance (*P*, 14), the 'paradox' of Christ's broken body as simultaneously divine and human, with the personified Cross 'aching' for His return, recalls the 'impossibility' of His two *concurrently* existent natures as articulated by the Chalcedonian Definition,<sup>42</sup> with the poet's visually swooping, peripatetic depictions ('hills', 'horizons', 'foreground') reinforcing the theme that in order to grasp the totality of an incident, theme or idea, one must view it from 'conflictive' perspectives. The facing poem, 'Amen' (*P*, 15) further underscores this idea. In this text, the perspectival pluralism within each stanza is clearly evident; synecdoche tumbles into metonymy, the abstract merges with the concrete and separates again, the text signifying that religious assent ('Accept; accept') lies

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<sup>42</sup> At the fourth session of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 it was decided as a matter of doctrinal truth that Christ simultaneously possesses two natures, the 'perfectly human' and the 'perfectly divine'.

within acknowledgement of the mind's largely 'polyvocalic', as opposed to 'monologic', construction and temperament.<sup>43</sup> In the much-anthologized 'The Moor' (*P*, 24), Thomas further maintains that the mind's desire to stabilize itself through 'undemanding' predication ('God is.../ God is not...') must be resisted, 'But stillness/ Of the heart's passions—that was praise/ Enough; and the mind's cession/ Of its kingdom', with the poem's revelatory, verb-infused conclusion, 'the air crumbled/ And broke on me like bread', indicative not of 'silent' introspection but liberating and animated religious *praxis*. Moreover, to consolidate the general argument that selfhood and divinity are in effect dynamic, the trope of the natural world as liturgically effervescent—and therefore symbolically and perspectively intricate—is picked up again and extended in the concluding stanza of 'Then' (*P*, 35), to suggest this time the sacramentally affirmative character of poetry's 'non-denotative' language:

We wandered upon the broad hills'

Back, crumbling the air's

Poetry. Nothing that nature

Did was a contradiction

That time, and the prey hung

Jewels round the day's throat.

Several of these early and 'middle period' poems, then, appear to foreground the innate

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<sup>43</sup> It is surprising that little has been said in regard to Thomas's actual sequencing of poems within individual collections, as quite often one poem is dependent upon another for its allusive vigour. Taking as a brief sample poems from the Eglwys-fach period, 'The Slave' (*SYT*, 104) may be seen as a companion piece to 'Autumn on the Land'; 'Temptation of a Poet' may be contrasted with 'Evans' (*PS*, 14, 15); 'Chapel Deacon' with 'The Country Clergy' (*PS*, 17, 28); 'Composition' with 'The Cure' (*PS*, 40, 41); 'The Conductor' with 'The Musician' (*T*, 13, 19); 'Country Cures' with 'Funeral' (*BT*, 8, 10); 'Becoming' with 'Parent' (*BT*, 14, 28); 'A Country' with 'Movement' (*BT*, 30, 35); 'For Instance' with 'Ravens' (*P*, 21, 22); 'The Visit' with 'Exchange' (*P*, 30, 31). It is arguable that this criss-crossing of themes and conceits and 'counterbalancing' of one poem by another, shows Thomas's desire to provide more than one metaphorical appropriation of a subject, thereby strengthening his broad idea that simplistic categorisations and descriptions must be repudiated in favour of the metaphysically and linguistically multifaceted.

complexity of the perceptual act. To return to the quotation from Matthew Arnold which served as one epigraph to this chapter, the sophisticated religious thinker must challenge ‘*supposed fact*’ rather than merely acquiesce to preconceived, theological taxonomies.<sup>44</sup> If we wish to understand divinity, then we must first understand the internal dynamics of our religious language and, in order to do that, we must be aware of how metaphor and metonymy actually function. In this sense, an in-depth evaluation of theological language forms the cornerstone of theological belief, and many of the Manafon and Eglwys-fach poems seem to point to the embedded connections—although connections not yet fully worked out by the developing poet—between theological nomenclature and theological discernment. As many of Thomas’s later religious poems will suggest, *aporia*, if correctly understood, *is* meaning; *apophasis* *is* cataphasis, and theological negations, by their very nature, are inextricably intertwined with the *via positiva*. It is certainly arguable, therefore, that Thomas’s early interest in the relationships between perception and taxonomy provided him with a conceptual blueprint with which he could later design a more meticulous and intellectually mature theological poetics, and it is to an examination of this later religious poetry to which we shall now turn.

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<sup>44</sup> David Amigoni has convincingly argued that Arnold was promoting: ‘a programme of intellectual construction that sought to assimilate the wayward epistemological forms of supernatural theology to a dominant epistemic conception of “naturalism”. Accordingly, a reformed *epistemological totality* [...] was the goal’. ‘Matthew Arnold and the Colenso Controversy: The Bible in “The Republic of Letters”’, in *Matthew Arnold: Between Two Worlds*, ed. Robert Giddings (London: Vision, 1986), 77-8. My emphasis. If this is correct, then similar ideas regarding the interplay between language and epistemology can also be argued to exist in Thomas’s poetry. Cf. this passage, highlighted by Thomas, from R. P. Blackmur’s essay on Lawrence’s poetics in *Language As Gesture: Essays in Poetry* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1954), 295: ‘principles may be extracted from most of the poetry we greatly value: the principle that the reality of language, which is a formal medium of knowledge, is superior and anterior to the reality of the uses to which it is put, and the operative principle, that the chaos of private experience cannot be known or understood until it is *projected and ordered in a form external to the consciousness that entertained it in flux*’. My emphasis. The text is held at the R. S. Thomas Study Centre at Bangor University.



### Chapter Three

#### **‘I dare not name him’: God and ‘God’— Voicing Inarticulacy, Restyling the Silence:**

##### *Not That He Brought Flowers (1968) to Frequencies (1978)*

Listening to the unheard-of in what the other is saying means following a patient, laborious path, sometimes getting lost and needing to start all over again, with all that is improvisational and, as it were, caressing in the act of attention, towards the singularity of the event that calls for his speech. It is only on this basis, on the basis of this perpetually inchoative fraternity in which what is *to be said* sets the tone, that the words of the other become audible, that is, respected. Their stammerings, their clumsiness, their inadequacy, their contradictions are no longer an obstacle, they are no longer privations or deficiencies from the point of view of some masterful speech: they mean something. But this meaningfulness has nothing in common with that of a symptom, which I decipher by myself in a supposedly expert fashion. It bears witness to the agnostic dimension of speech, it demonstrates that every act of speech is a hand-to-hand combat with silence, with what cannot be said and yet will be said.<sup>1</sup>

—Sorry, but more than one, it is always necessary to be more than one in order to speak, several voices are necessary for that...

—Yes, granted, and par excellence, let us say exemplarily, when it’s a matter of God...

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, trans. Andrew Brown (London: Routledge, 2004), 14.

—Still more, if this is possible, when one claims to speak about God according to what they call apophasis [*l' apophase*], in other words, according to the voiceless voice [*la voix blanche*], the way of theology called or so-called negative. This voice multiplies itself, dividing within itself: it says one thing and its contrary, God that is without being or God that (is) beyond being. The *apophasis* is a declaration, an explanation, a response that, taking on the subject of God a negative or interrogative form (for that is also what *apophasis* means), at times so resembles a profession of atheism as to be mistaken for it.<sup>2</sup>

In the preceding chapter we saw that several important poems from Thomas's Manafon and Eglwys-fach periods are 'unstable' at their rhetorical core. These texts appear fundamentally paratactical and multi-layered, and often turn on the theme that in order to fully appropriate an object, scene or image, one must firstly recognize the importance of contrasting perceptual standpoints. With this in mind, it may now be proposed that many of the apparently 'negative' religious poems within the Aberdaron collections should be viewed as foregrounding metaphysical and linguistic complexity; therefore, it can be argued these poems appear to emphasize the *interdependence* of apophasis and cataphasis. In these poems, apophatic 'negativity' does not demolish cataphatic 'positivity', because the theodicy presented within these poems is hermeneutical and phenomenological, as opposed to extralinguistic, foundational or absolutist. Thomas is not envisaging an ineffable, unutterable or—to use a more recent expression borrowed from the philosopher of religion John Hick—'transcategorical' deity, but rather wishes to attack the effectiveness of *all* our obdurately 'predicative' onto-theological ascriptions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> 'Sauf le nom', in Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey Jr., and Ian Mcleod (Stanford: Stanford U. P., 1995), 35.

<sup>3</sup> John Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion*, (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 76. Chapter 3 in Hick's book, 'Ineffability: A Response to William Rowe and Christopher Insole', provides a convenient synopsis

In his important analysis of the connections and correlations between literary criticism and theology, David Jasper writes:

True perception, the ability really to look at things, is a great destroyer of idols, and the textuality of proper theodical discourse will deconstructively lead us beyond a myopic concern with the limited conclusions drawn from closure of the text, to a teleological perspective, a faithful *commitment* to deferment of meaning and image [...] Enactment is all.<sup>4</sup>

There are, of course, a multitude of ways in which the creative artist through ‘enactment’, or dramatization, may resolve, at least to some extent, the metaphysical puzzles and epistemic challenges thrown up by a particular subject—one thinks, perhaps, of Aristotelian mimetic theory with its insistence that literature ‘completes’ reality—but in the case of Thomas, since divine ‘silence’ is so apparently ubiquitous within his work, it would appear we must eventually arrive at exegetical deadlock. God is absent and therefore by necessity ‘unspeaking’ and the religious poetry, as we saw in chapter one, is either a depiction of theological despondency, albeit sporadically shot through with moments of incommunicable ‘revelation’, or, most notably in the poems written after Thomas’s retirement in 1978, is indicative of a sort of wintry acceptance that human understanding must remain nullified and powerless when confronted with the transcendental. God, viewed *sub specie aeternitatus*, is not only taciturn but endlessly impenetrable, and Thomas’s religious verse may therefore be interpreted as continuously

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of apophatic thought within Jewish mysticism, Islam, Hinduism and the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism, as well as giving handy summaries of the work of Gregory of Nyssa, Denys (pseudo-Dionysius) and Eckhart on the relationship between religious experience and religious language. What is striking, is that the three great monotheistic religions as well as the polytheistic religions originating in India, all entail a ‘dual’ conception of God as simultaneously ‘transcategorical’ yet ‘religiously available’, a symbiosis of the ‘possible’ and ‘impossible’ which also appears vividly apparent in Thomas.

<sup>4</sup> David Jasper, *The Study of Literature and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 130-131. Emphasis in original.

‘enacting’ its own referential inadequacy. ‘God’, to present it bluntly, is a signifier which has discarded its signification and, analogous with this reading of the poetry, is the accompanying conjecture that the semantic keystones of theodical discourse (‘Logos’, ‘Incarnation’, ‘kerygma’) must eventually crumble into triviality and inconsequence.

Such a view of Thomas’s religious poetry presses with compelling force on our critical intelligence, for there is an agreeable symmetry in the contention that verbal ‘bankruptcy’ is a requisite corollary of divine ‘speechlessness’, with God’s silence replicated in succession by man’s semantic penury. However, we must also note that speechlessness, for God and man alike, may still imply that which is eloquent or loquacious, given that *theological* silence, as Jean-Louis Chrétien emphasizes throughout his masterful analysis of the interplay between speaking and non-speaking, has nothing in common whatsoever with either dumbfounded inarticulacy or voiceless contemplation. Indeed, a ‘negative’ theology turning on the concept of silence as *mere* inarticulacy—a double suicide, as it were, of thought *and* speech—is in considerable danger itself of lapsing into the cultic or idolatrous; as St. Maximus the Confessor writes, silence ‘is to the highest degree polyphonic’ and is in no way commensurate with either absence or privation.<sup>5</sup> Properly understood, tropes or figures of divine silence are always turned

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<sup>5</sup> Maximus the Confessor, in *Patrologiae*, cited by Chrétien, 71. Chrétien discusses the presentation of ‘silence’ in the work of several important thinkers and maintains that, contrary to much accepted orthodoxy: ‘The importance of silence in Christian mysticism cannot [...] be derived from a Platonic tradition, such as that of Plotinus or Proclus, for it is an issue from the first generations onwards, and more specifically in the very body of work in which the word “Christianity” makes its first appearance, namely the epistles of St. Ignatius of Antioch, the theologian of the Word and silence in their mutual inter-relations’. Ibid. In continuation of this, Chrétien argues that Karl Jaspers’s view of silence as ‘the highest human possibility’ is ‘idolatrous of the void in the shape of failure’. Chrétien quotes the end of Jaspers’s *Philosophy* as an example of misplaced ‘reverence’ for linguistic collapse: ‘We cannot know why the world is; perhaps we can experience it in failure, but we cannot then *say* it. In the empirical condition, in the fact of being, there is no longer, given the extent of the failure, any more thought or speech. Only silence is possible in the face of the silence of reality. But if speech tries to break the silence, it will speak without saying anything’. Ibid., 70. Jaspers, in Chrétien’s reading, is guilty of replacing one ‘idol’ with another; of exchanging an idolatry of unsustainable deific paradigms with one in which ‘nothingness’ itself is worshipped, instead of negating (or surpassing) the negations themselves. In Chrétien’s view, what one must do instead is formulate a theodicy where, as in the Catholic anthem for the Octave of the Nativity—a paraphrase of Wisdom 18: 14-15—speech fluctuates between one silence and another: ‘*Dum medium silentium tenerent omnia, et nox in suo cursu medio, iter perageret, omnipotens Sermo tuus, Domine, a regalibus sedibus venit, alleluia*’. (‘While peaceful silence lay over all, and night had run the half of her swift course, down from the heavens, from the royal throne, leapt your all-powerful Word’.) Ibid., 43. All of Chrétien’s book is of great interest, and his conclusions on a range of philosophical and theological issues seem so pertinent to a reading of Thomas that it is surprising he has never been quoted, as far as I am aware, in any of the more recent secondary literature.

towards speech, because silence, like any other communicative event, is also imbued with valuable and constructive rhetorical significance. Silence's implications, disclosures and aporias, presuppose passivity *and* activity, in the same way that listening, an *active* event, is wholly dependent upon a prior undertaking of speechlessness. Heidegger, appealing to the difference between 'speaking' and 'saying' (*Sprechen* and *Sagen*), depicts this central bifurcation well: 'Someone may speak, endlessly, and it all means nothing. On the other hand, imagine someone keeping silent: he does not speak and in not speaking he may be able to say many things'.<sup>6</sup> Angelus Silesius phrases a similar concern thus: 'So do you think, poor man, that the cries of your mouth/ Are the song of praise that befits the silent deity?'<sup>7</sup> St. Augustine writes in his commentary on the Psalms, 'For he who desires, even if his tongue is silent, sings from his heart',<sup>8</sup> whilst Kierkegaard, prefiguring Heidegger, draws a parallel distinction between speech as 'chattering' and a non-verbal 'enactment' of the *silentium loquendi magister* ('silence as the master of speech') of the Christian Middle Ages:

What does *chattering* mean? It means abolishing the passionate disjunction between speaking and being silent. Only a man who is essentially able to keep silent is essentially able to speak; and only he who is essentially able to keep silent is essentially able to act.<sup>9</sup>

There is no need to proliferate the examples.<sup>10</sup> What is important, is that any writing in relation to divine speech or speechlessness, or any meditation upon divine speech or

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, cited in Chrétien, 59.

<sup>7</sup> Angelus Silesius, *Der Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, cited in Chrétien, 31.

<sup>8</sup> St. Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 86, 1, cited in Chrétien, 47.

<sup>9</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *The Complete Letters*, cited in Chrétien, 42.

<sup>10</sup> Chrétien's second and third chapters provide a wealth of detailed commentary on representations of 'wounded' speech—meaning silence as mere 'inarticulacy'—and silence as 'hospitality—meaning silence as an 'invitation' to speech—in a staggeringly varied number of authors.

speechlessness, must occur in *coalition* with silence—not in confederacy with ‘anti-theism’ against it—for speech is self-evidently dependent upon *listening*, and listening cannot occur unless silence is initially observed. Silence therefore is dynamically dialogic, and in the Aberdaron collections, I will suggest, Thomas often presents this ‘heteroglossia’ of speechlessness through various *prosopopoeiae*.<sup>11</sup> The employment of this trope allows Thomas to preserve the ‘otherness’ of his deity without lapsing into self-negating and thus metaphysically hollow anthropomorphism, whilst enabling *at the same time* the assemblage of meaningful, theological predication. The epistemologically-grounded impediments to religious understanding within apophatic and cataphatic discourse are therefore not merely side-stepped but lastingly invalidated. A controlling rhetoric of *prosopopoeia*, I hope to show, means that the *necessary* silence of the ‘*Deus Absconditus*’ is preserved, yet shown to be both theologically affirmative and communicatively voluble. I will further maintain that once the shackles of the apophatic have not so much been unbolted as shown to have been never really there, then deific silence may indeed, as à Kempis puts it, ‘*speak to us without the noise of any words*’: ‘*Veritas intus loquitur sine strepitu verborum*’.<sup>12</sup>

In ‘After the Lecture’ (*NTHBF*, 22), it is arguable that Thomas’s predominant, rhetorical compulsion, is to foreground the remorseless collapse of theological predication—‘I know all the tropes/ Of religion, how God is not there/ To go to’—by drawing attention to religious ‘listening’ as a broadly passive event.<sup>13</sup> However, it is imperative to recognize also that tropes and figures of silence can only be found within a *space* where speech and speechlessness belong reciprocally to each other— to paraphrase and invert the initially

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<sup>11</sup> Prosopopoeia is a rhetorical device whereby an absent speaker communicates by speaking as another person or object. Thus, the trope is not the same as either personification or anthropomorphism, as both these figures obviously imbue *non*-speaking entities with the ability to speak.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, cited in Chrétien, 52. My emphasis.

<sup>13</sup> This is Vimala Herman’s reading in ‘Negativity and Language in the Religious Poetry of R. S. Thomas’, in *Miraculous Simplicity*, 152-3: ‘The lecture has been given, but the attempt to make sense of it frustrated. The stance of tired self-defeat that characterizes the opening lines of the poem points to the fact that the meaning of the text—the paradox of God, signified in the oppositional symbols of hawk and dove—has been explored before, but remains elusive [...] The attempt to understand is defeated’.

disconcerting logic of David in Psalm 109, if praise is returned *by* silence, then the same praise may also be construed *as* silence. Theological silence, whether Aquinean ‘voicelessness’ before an object of veneration<sup>14</sup> or the ‘perfect silence’ succeeding the ‘perfect ignorance, the ignorance which considers all knowledge to be unworthy’ of St. John of Damascus,<sup>15</sup> is both loquacious *and* taciturn, garrulous *and* unforthcoming. Before silence may be posited as the solitary, fitting response to a ‘transcendent’ deity, one must previously have conceptualized that deity as a *relational* being and henceforward determined that He *cannot* be wholly transcendent. One may conceive of God as ‘withdrawing’ from the world, but withdrawal—*pace* certain moments in J. Hillis Miller<sup>16</sup>—is not cognate with ‘disappearance’; on the contrary, withdrawal presupposes existence, as silence correspondingly presupposes colloquy. In this context, John Sallis, writing on post-Heideggerian ‘exhaustion of language’ in the ‘wake of nihilism’, argues that:

To come to belong to Being so as to speak from it is to undergo a displacement [...] It is not just that the human is to be rethought as Da-sein rather than conceived as rational animal but rather that in the saying as such this transformation must be undergone. To come again to say Being in the wake of nihilism, in the very abandonment of Being, is to undergo a decisive transformation. It is to be displaced [...] This displacement is possible, according to Heidegger, only if man is properly attuned—or comes to be so

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<sup>14</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, cited in Chrétien, 66.

<sup>15</sup> St. John of Damascus, *Des premiers principes*, cited in Chrétien, 68. Chrétien calls St. John of Damascus, ‘the greatest “deconstructor” in the history of philosophy’ his argument turning on the assertion: ‘silence for St. John of Damascus cannot in truth keep silent about the absolute, for this latter must not be relational. To posit a relation between the absolute and us means to determine it, define it, albeit negatively, and thus make it fall from its transcendent condition, or rather its unconditioned state [...] This is why what is beyond everything cannot be the Lord revealed by the Holy Scriptures: what is denied him is the sovereign liberty on which depends any relationship that the absolute can create between what springs from it and its own self, without thereby imprisoning or losing itself in it. For St. John of Damascus, in a word, our silence is silent only about ourselves. Even the Logos of philosophy, left to itself, finally calls for its own nirvana’. *Ibid.*, 68-69.

<sup>16</sup> See for example, *The Disappearance of God*, 20-1 (on De Quincey); 116-7 (on Browning); 234-5 (on Arnold).

attuned—to Being in its very withdrawal. The fundamental attunement (*Grundstimmung*) required is complex, irreducible to a single mode such as wonder, which constituted the fundamental attunement in the first beginning. In the other beginning the attunement must be manifold, because it must open man to Being precisely through exposing him to beings bereft of Being [...]. This attunement not only opens the possibility of thoughtfully saying Being in the wake of nihilism but also sustains such saying throughout its course.<sup>17</sup>

Dasein is therefore located in awareness of dislodgement and *disarticulation* (Sallis's 'fundamental attunement'), which will lead accordingly to recognition that what is true is not perpetually 'hidden' but repeatedly concealed. The proper occupation of thought is thus to *continually* wrest the unconcealed from the concealed. In Heidegger's interpretation of Book 7 of the *Republic*, once we have turned away from the compulsive images in the cave to grasp more 'unconcealedly' what we had previously seen only as distortions, we must then *revisit* the cave to begin again the process of divulgence and disclosure. In this, we are consequently enacting the fact that the 'unconcealed' has been appropriated, with each revisiting, as it were, affording greater complexity to our (re) 'attunement' or epistemic reorientation.<sup>18</sup> As in

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<sup>17</sup> *The Verge of Philosophy* (Chicago: U. C. P., 2007), 144-5.

<sup>18</sup> Sallis, commenting further on Heidegger's interpretation of the famous metaphor of the cave in his *Plato's Doctrine of Truth*, makes the interesting point that in Book 7 Plato repeats the story of the cave seven times, with each repetition adding to our understanding of the original narrative. These repetitions, according to Sallis, show that each annexation of truth is both definite *and* indefinite and that appropriating the unconcealed (or *das Unverborgene* as Heidegger calls it) is a continuously developing epistemic process. *Ibid.*, 19-20. Although Sallis does not make the comparison, this is similar to Karl Rahner's idea that the *Vorgriff auf esse* (or 'pre-apprehension of being') entails a persistent dialogue between the transcendental and the categorical. See for example, Karen Kilby, 'Karl Rahner', in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, ed. David F. Ford with Rachel Muers (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 99: 'Rahner maintains that the transcendental always needs somehow to articulate itself, to express itself, in the categorical. By definition, of course, transcendental experience is that realm of experience where language fails: we have language for objects, for distinguishing one thing from another, for putting things in categories, but not for that which cannot in principle be an object, for that which is beyond all categories, for the infinite horizon within which the distinguishing takes place. And yet transcendental experience cannot simply remain inarticulate, but always seeks expression in the realm of the categorical. The expression will never be wholly accurate, will always in some way fail, but it must always nevertheless be attempted'. Clearly, Rahner's understanding of religious discourse as dialectical *symbiosis* could also be applied to Thomas.



Jasper's view quoted above with its contention that deferment of meaning *is* meaning, and in the same way that in the Platonic metaphor of the cave the liberated prisoner is persistently denied sight of the sun itself—for if that were not the case he would of course be blinded and therefore all things would be concealed forever—Sallis maintains that all we may ever appropriate are surrogates that take the place of origins. By necessity, the 'good' *must* withdraw, thereby heralding what Derrida in 'Plato's Pharmacy' terms 'the advent of the dialectical supplement'.<sup>19</sup> The embedded antagonism between paradigm and image will *never* be resolved, for 'the concept always demands sentences, discourses, work and process: text, in a word'.<sup>20</sup>

Since the central contention of this thesis is that R. S. Thomas, properly understood, is not an 'apophatic' poet at all, it would perhaps be advantageous at this point to provide a brief synopsis of the *via negativa* tradition which the poet inherited. It cannot be overemphasized that the *via negativa* 'methodology' within Christian thought is a long-established *tradition*, and one which can be traced to at least to the fifth or sixth century *Mystical Theology* of pseudo-Dionysius, which is itself a dialectical counter-balance to his earlier *Divine Names*.<sup>21</sup> In this latter text, pseudo-Dionysius states explicitly that although 'we must not dare to apply words or conceptions to this hidden transcendent God' we can, nonetheless, 'use whatever appropriate symbols we can for the things of God. With these analogies we are raised upward toward the truth of the mind's vision, a truth which is simple and one'.<sup>22</sup> This argument is then 'negated' in the *Mystical Theology* with the testimony:

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<sup>19</sup> Cited in Sallis, 59.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Comme si' c'était possible', in *Questioning Derrida: With his replies on philosophy*, ed. Michel Meyer (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 103.

<sup>21</sup> For an overview of the history of Dionysianism, see Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (Oxford: O. U. P., 1993). For the history of apophaticism in general, see Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence* (Bonn: Hanstein, 1986).

<sup>22</sup> *Pseudo-Dionysius, The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1987), 50-3.

we should praise the denials quite differently than we do the assertions. When we made assertions we began with the first things, moved down through intermediate terms until we reached the last things. But now as we climb from the last things up to the most primary we deny all things so that we may unhiddenly know that unknowing which itself is hidden from all those possessed of knowing amid all beings, so that we may see above being that darkness concealed from all the light among beings.<sup>23</sup>

With these extended metaphors of concurrent ascension and descension, used throughout both texts as well as to some extent in *The Celestial Hierarchy*,<sup>24</sup> pseudo-Dionysius is arguing, as Denys Turner forcefully points out, that:

the way of negation is not a sort of po-faced, mechanical process, as it were, or serial negation [...] Rather [...] the way of negation demands prolixity; it demands the maximization, not the minimization of talk about God; it demands that we talk about God in as many ways as possible, even in as many conflicting ways as possible, that we use up the whole stock-in-trade of imagery and discourse in our possession, so as thereby to discover ultimately the inadequacy of all of it, deserts, silences, dark nights and all.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>24</sup> For example: 'Since the way of negation appears to be more suitable to the realm of the divine and since positive affirmations are always unfitting to the hiddenness of the inexpressible, a manifestation through dissimilar shapes is more correctly to be applied to the invisible. So it is that scriptural writings, far from demeaning the ranks of heaven, actually pay them honour by describing them with dissimilar shapes so completely at variance with what they really are that we come to discover how those ranks, so far removed from us, transcend all materiality. Furthermore, I doubt that anyone would refuse to acknowledge that incongruities are more suitable for lifting our minds up into the domain of the spiritual than similarities are'. Ibid., 150.

<sup>25</sup> 'Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason', in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner (Cambridge: C. U. P., 2002), 17. Turner is one of the most important theologians to have written extensively on the relationships between mysticism and the *via negativa*, arguing especially for an interpretation of medieval mysticism which is not based on actual mystical experiences. See his *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: C. U. P., 1995), where he claims: 'in so far as the word "mysticism" has a contemporary meaning; and that is so far as that contemporary meaning links

As Turner in his article proceeds to stress, the apophasis of pseudo-Dionysius is dialectically contingent upon his own cataphatic theology and vice versa. The *via negativa* depends for its argumentative energy on its *own* negation and the *via positiva*, by a similar process of accentuating referential redundancy, in turn projects us back to the *via negativa*, which will then dismantle itself to form a new antithesis-cum-thesis-cum-synthesis and so on, ad infinitum. John McQuarrie, a theologian contemporary with Thomas, begins his examination of religious language with a quotation from Paul van Buren—‘the problem now is that the word “God” is dead’<sup>26</sup>—and, as part of his prolonged argument to prove the contrary, attempts to establish that the *via negativa*:

simply denies the infinite all characteristics of the finite, the *via eminentiae* claims that every positive characteristic of the finite bears some affinity to a corresponding characteristic of the infinite, in which, so to speak, the positive characteristics of finite being are raised to a pre-eminent degree. Thus, every analogous predication involves the assertion of likeness and unlikeness.<sup>27</sup>

Epistemic paradox when encountering the *via negativa* cannot be avoided and is indeed the bridge *between* apophatic and cataphatic discourse. The keynote for both forms of discourse is a ‘deontologisation’ of words; that is, before one can speak sensibly of God, one must know, as was pointed out at the end of the previous chapter, what one’s theological nomenclature

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“mysticism” to the cultivation of certain types of experience—of “inwardness”, “ascent” and “union”—then the mediaeval “mystic” offers an anti-mysticism. For though the mediaeval Christian neoplatonist used that same language of interiority, ascent and “oneness”, he or she did so precisely in order to deny that they were terms descriptive of “experiences”. And the central metaphor of this negativity, of this restraint of “experience”, was the apophatic metaphor of “light” and “darkness”, of the “cloud of unknowing.” 4.

<sup>26</sup> *The Secular Meaning of the Gospel* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 103.

<sup>27</sup> *God-Talk: An Examination of the Language and Logic of Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 29.

actually *denotes*.<sup>28</sup> This talk of ‘discourse’ and ‘ontology’ may sound like mere post-structuralist ostentation, but the argument that discourse may ‘limit’ deity is firmly cognate with the second hemistich of Psalm 78, ‘I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old’, and even more so with that favourite proof-text of apophatic theology, Isaiah 45: 15: ‘Truly you are a God who hidest thyself’.<sup>29</sup> From its inception, Christian thought regarding the possibilities of what can meaningfully be predicated of God has involved a continual dialogue between numerous forms of rational, mystical, and experiential theology. Indeed, the word “mystical” itself requires careful scrutiny, for at the back of it lies the Greek root ‘*mu-*’, meaning something closed, which with St. Paul became ‘*mysterion*’, a secret or mystery (*mystikos*), which in turn refers to God’s love for man as revealed through the person of Christ. Therefore, etymologically speaking, ‘mysticism’ ultimately signifies man in communication or *dialogue* with God and, if that is the case, then appellations such as ‘Thomas as mystic’ or ‘Thomas as poet of absence’ and so forth, need to be treated with a degree of critical circumspection which is not always in evidence. Certainly Thomas, like pseudo-Dionysius, does not ‘give God names’, but it does not follow from this that God cannot be *revealed* in names:

It might be more accurate to say that we cannot know God in his nature, since this is unknowable and is beyond the reach of mind or reason. But we know him from the arrangement of everything, because everything is, in a sense, projected out from him, and

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<sup>28</sup> Important studies on the nature of religious metaphor are: William P. Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays on Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell U. P., 1980); Sally McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress P., 1982) and *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress P., 1987); Janet M. Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford Clarendon P., 1985).

<sup>29</sup> As MacQuarrie points out (29), ‘dark sayings’ is the usual translation from the Hebrew ‘*hida*’, which means ‘riddle’. The same metaphor is also used by Paul in I Corinthians, 13: 12. Other oft-cited ‘apophatic’ texts are: Exodus 19: 9, 16, 18; Isaiah 40: 1, 55: 8; Psalm 39: 1; Mark 14: 36.

this order possesses certain images and semblances of his divine paradigms [...] God is therefore known in all things and as distinct from all things. He is known through knowledge and through unknowing [...] On the other hand he cannot be understood, *words cannot contain him, and no name can lay hold of him* [...] This is the sort of language we must use about God.<sup>30</sup>

This passage, with its careful equilibrium of antithetical reference—a passage cited, indeed, by the Author in chapter 70 of *The Cloud of Unknowing*—demonstrates that ‘Apophatic and cataphatic theology apply to the One God and represent the movement by which the intellect grasps God’s revelation of himself by affirming it’.<sup>31</sup> Figures of speech, to put it another way, do not ‘incarnate’ the speaker or writer’s ‘soul’, but entail a radical form of ‘atropism’ where tropes turn back into themselves to begin again a continual process of modulation, disjunction and differentiation. Each onto-theological statement is, by its very nature, trapped within a complex of further statements which both assert and deny the onto-theological import of any statement made within the network:

There are not now, nor have there ever been, two theologies: one “positive”, the other “negative”. The negative way, the “*via negativa*”, is simply the endlessly demanding *disciplining* of language and imagination which we need.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine Names*, 108-9. My emphasis.

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (Wilton: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989), 88. It is probable that the Author’s earliest text is his paraphrase of Richard of St. Victor’s *Benjamin Minor*. The same writer’s *Benjamin major* contains the following: ‘To enter the Cloud of Unknowing is to rise above mind, and by means of the cloud of forgetfulness, to hide from the mind the awareness of whatever lies at hand’. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. James Walsh, S. J. (New York: Paulist P., 1981), 128. Here, we see expressed again one of the central ideas of apophatic theology: the mind itself must be confronted if mature religious thought is to develop.

<sup>32</sup> Nicolas Lash, ‘The Question of God Today’, in *Transcending Boundaries in Philosophy and Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer and Martin Warner (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007), 138. Emphasis in original.

To speak of negative theology in terms of what it ‘is’—‘to buy into the restricted economy of ontological and theological cataphasis’, as Toby Foshay describes it<sup>33</sup>—is to entangle oneself within oxymoron. The discourses of negative theology are themselves subservient to the discourses of negativity, in the same way that the type of negative existential referred to above (‘God is not’...), remains a confirmatory statement. As apophatic statements collapse into cataphatic ones and vice versa, what is *really* portrayed is something akin to what Jonathan Culler, writing on alienation and ‘incongruency’ in modern poetry describes as the ‘dramatization of consciousness attempting to engage the world’.<sup>34</sup> The negation of specificity (‘God is’.../ ‘God is not’...) becomes a powerful appeal to the nature of mind and language themselves, and the tension produced by the play of opposites obliges us to convert texts from mimetic to essentially *performative* acts. Truth therefore develops into that which is perspectival and plural. This is not a skeptical argument (unless we interpret skepticism in its original sense of *skepsis*, meaning the attempt to see and understand) but an argument designed to unveil the truth: ‘God’s impossibility acts [...] not to deaden religious feeling or to close down theological discussion but to draw it out’.<sup>35</sup> Deific ‘impossibility’ is a way of ‘protecting’ God from classification; like the prophets of Deutero-Isaiah with their iconoclastic arguments (‘To whom can you compare God? What image can you contrive of him?’ 40: 18), apophatic theology, properly deciphered, demonstrates that God’s ‘wholly otherness’ is beyond *specific* representation: ‘we cannot separate the metaphorical “is” from the literal “is not”’; because both remain present and active in the statement, there is tension between them. The “is” poses an identity, the “is not” a difference; the result is “is like” or “being-as”’.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> ‘Denegation and Resentment’, in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 5.

<sup>34</sup> ‘On the Negativity of Modern Poetry: Friedrich, Baudelaire, and the Critical Tradition’, in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory* (Stanford: S. U. P., 1996), 194.

<sup>35</sup> Hugh Rayment-Pickard, *Impossible God: Derrida’s Theology* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2003), 147.

<sup>36</sup> J. Muis, ‘The truth of metaphorical God-talk’, in *The Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 63, no. 2 (2010), 155-6.

With this accentuation of dialectical multiplicity as opposed to ‘monologic’ signification in mind, it is worth now reconsidering ‘After The Lecture’, and especially the second and concluding stanza where the challenges posed by the failed ‘tropes/ of religion’ in the first, are not only reengaged but forcefully contested. Here, the *prosopopeia* of God as silence and hence speaking to us through and *with* silence, is captured by the opening clause— ‘one not to be penned/ In by a concept’—and is extended by means of the terse declaration of deific attributes as ‘the negations of thought’.<sup>37</sup> The figure here recalls the ‘standard’ apophatic rejoinder of divinity as ‘outwith’ the classificatory or taxonomic, yet the ensuing, semi-martial image of a God ‘who holds us at bay with/ His symbols’, capsizes the initial metaphor to advocate now the *supremacy* of tropic portrayal within theological exploration or depiction. What has collapsed, in other words, are not religious *topoi* themselves, but any religious language which endeavours to deny or circumvent its inescapable tropic allusiveness via the erroneous assumption that ‘singular’ predication is not only achievable but theologically compulsory. As in the much earlier ‘Spring Equinox’, Thomas appears to be foregrounding in this poem the *inexorability* of metaphor in the delineation of a concept (and also, we could argue, the unreliability of ‘definitions’) and is thus further underscoring our distorting impulsiveness in desiring a calcified doctrine of religion, when sensitive thought shows that the noun ‘religion’ itself often requires vigilant interpretation.<sup>38</sup> To turn once more to John

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<sup>37</sup> I am grateful to Tony Brown for pointing out the pun in the lines ‘penned/ In by a concept’. God, in other words, cannot be defined or ‘written’ by *rigidly* conceptual nomenclature.

<sup>38</sup> Eric Reitan in *Is God a Delusion: A Reply to Religion’s Cultured Despisers* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), begins his stimulating argument against the ‘new atheists’ (meaning predominantly Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, and the group of thinkers ‘led’, as it were, by them) by showing that their attacks often fall wide of the target due to the dissimilar (and muddled) ways in which they appear to define the central term: ‘When we use the term “religion”, we might mean a system of doctrines. Then again, we might mean a body of explanatory myths, or a social institution organized around shared beliefs and ritual practices, or the personal convictions of an individual, or a person’s sense of relatedness to the divine [...] The fact is, we use the term “religion” in a variety of ways. And this fact makes it difficult to talk precisely about religion, let alone attack it with valid objections. Whenever usage is so varied, there is a real danger that one will fall prey to what philosophers call *equivocation*— that is, the fallacy of using the same term in different senses in the course of a single argument or discussion, without noticing the shift’.15-16. Reitan’s counter-argument is therefore premised on the idea of ‘category mistakes’. This exegetical tactic could also be used in contending that Thomas’s religious poetry often shows how theological confusion is a consequence of assuming semantic ‘equivalence’, when the subject-terms within certain religious propositions actually transmit contradictory denotation.

Hick, God's placing of Himself at an 'epistemic distance' from us means that metaphorical representations of Him are all that we have, but this 'estrangement' is epistemically *required* if we are to develop as autonomous and properly sentient beings.<sup>39</sup> If God were not concealed and came to us 'unconditionally'—and could therefore be described without the use of metaphor, if indeed, it were possible to describe *anything* 'non-figuratively'—then clearly whatever understanding we had of God would be so different from that which we currently entertain that we would be using the signifier 'God' in a way which, for us now, is literally unthinkable.<sup>40</sup> God, in other words, would not be 'God', and religious belief itself would cease to exist, as one does not 'believe', but rather 'states', incontestable facticity.

In the famous 'Kneeling' (*NTHBF*, 32), Thomas again refuses to allow 'God' to settle into conclusive, stable signification, the poem releasing and disseminating instead the expression's range of semantic values. Once more, the dominant structural maneuver is to establish an opening conceit—in this case God as 'offstage' prompter or even playwright—which will be subsequently amplified and inverted in the concluding stanza. The pervasive diction of theatricality ('I acted/ A great rôle'; 'the audiences/ Still'; 'Prompt me, God'), suggest a broad theme of religious worship as characteristically preformative but the much-quoted final line, 'The meaning is in the waiting', appears to countermand this to evoke now the inanity of prayer's practical relevance.<sup>41</sup> However, to fully understand the poem, we must be conscious again of self-referential irony within the closing stanza. Despite the Augustinian-

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<sup>39</sup>John Hick, "An Irenaean Theodicy", in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, ed. S. T. Davis (Louisville: Westminster John Knox P., 2001), 42. Cited in Reitan, 38.

<sup>40</sup>Of course, this idea is merely a variant of the classic 'fideistic' view that religion *compels* belief in the 'impossible'—for example, Tertullian's '*credo quia absurdum*' or Kierkegaard's infamous 'leap of faith'—for if God's existence were provable, then obviously the very concept of 'faith' as a vehicle for any worthwhile religious epistemology would become superfluous.

<sup>41</sup>Cf. Rowan Williams, 'Suspending the Ethical: R. S. Thomas and Kierkegaard', in *Miraculous Simplicity*, 211: 'The poem as a whole makes it clear that the waiting is something that is, at one level, chosen: it is what happens when the praying person refuses premature speech, waiting for the unimaginable moment when God is manifest *as* God, not as the end of a human process of justification, not as a performance by a human speaker. God cannot be forced to appear, even when the words we speak are good words, authorized words, words of adoration and worship'.



tinted, mordant plea for annulment ('Prompt me, God;/ But not yet'), Thomas is obviously not decreeing that prayer lacks expressive content. The verb of the title is strongly indicative of the difference between supposing prayer to be an end in itself and the attitude of being *prayerful*; that is, engaging in prayer for its own sake as opposed to the teleological idea of praying for a specific objective. The exegetical focal point is located within awareness of ineffective ostensive definition ('God/ prayer, is/ is not, *this...*'), with the knotty, tri-partite conceit of God as exhorting speech, then speaking but failing to speak 'articulately' through His interlocutor, symptomatic of the poem's overall contention that silence is dialogically animated. For a second time within the collection, the *prosopopoeia* of an 'absent' God *speaking* to us through silence itself or, if we wish to add a further interpretative twist, speaking to us through the declamatory 'silence' purportedly objectified by the *poem*—for the poem is obviously a communicative event—means that Thomas can protect the immanence of God whilst simultaneously allowing Him some degree of 'personalization'. We must remember that *prosopopoeia* is not the same as either personification or anthropomorphism; for the trope to function at all, whatever the writer aspires to depict must initially be endowed with 'personhood'. Moreover, it is important to realize that the act of 'waiting', in a religious framework, is both epistemically and ontologically vigorous: religious 'waiting' does not merely entail postponement or delay but expectancy or anticipation. In other words, like the act of kneeling or the act of listening to silence, or any other performative action, the act of waiting is not simply inert or passive, but is infused with dynamic significance and potential.

Like Alciphron in Bishop Berkeley's *Dialogue*,<sup>42</sup> Thomas appears to believe that

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<sup>42</sup> 'First then let me tell you I am not to be persuaded by metaphysical arguments; such, for instance, as are drawn from the idea of an all-perfect being, or the absurdity of an infinite progression of causes. These sorts of arguments I have always found dry and jejune; and, as they are not suited to my way of thinking, they may perhaps puzzle, but will never convince me [...] all proofs drawn from utility or convenience are foreign to the purpose. They may prove indeed the usefulness of the notion, but not the existence of the thing'. George Berkeley, *Alciphron: Or, the Minute Philosopher* cited in, Donald A. Wells, *God, Man, and the Thinker: Philosophies of Religion* (New York: Random House, 1964), 105.

theology's task is to reflect upon religious *experience*—including the experience of ‘waiting’ for God—rather than conjecturing or expressing deific *attributes*, an important distinction between the empirical and the theoretic-metaphysical in religious knowledge, not always observable in Thomas scholarship. As several critics have argued, the ‘theological’ poems, especially those from *H'm* (1972) onwards, often involve a deep-seated reappraisal of religion's innermost ideas and concepts, with the noun ‘God’ itself, a repeatedly-engaged object of scrutiny.<sup>43</sup> The thematic objective in many of these texts is not only to overhaul what the ‘correct’ signification of ‘God’ actually is, but to provide counsel as to how we should use or *employ* a term whose denotative robustness appears constantly undermined by Rorty's ‘linguistic turn’ in postmodernist thought.<sup>44</sup> To quote the later Wittgenstein, ‘Sometimes an expression has to be withdrawn from language and sent for cleaning— then it can be put back into circulation’.<sup>45</sup>

*H'm* contains many examples of poems which suggest a form of Wittgensteinian ‘semantic laundering’; poems within which ‘God’, as signifier, is permitted to exhibit and divulge a range of signification. Although there may exist, to phrase this paradoxical idea another way, an intractable opposition between the onto-theological paradigm (‘God *is*...’) and

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<sup>43</sup> See Tony Brown, *R. S. Thomas: Writers of Wales*, 75: ‘The God of *H'm* is essentially a parody of the god that humankind has created in its own image, the anthropomorphized god who can be addressed directly as “Lord”, “King”, “Father”, a being to whom supplication can be made and yet who can in response to the world's suffering and pain seem, in the human terms in which he has been constructed, illogical and cruelly indifferent’; Ioan Williams, ‘Beyond Steady Perception’, in *Planet* 15 (1973), 76: ‘In these poems [of *H'm*] even the concept of God has been fragmented: he has degenerated to the status of a metaphor, susceptible of manipulation by the poet, presented as capable of inconsistency, involvement, grief and envy’; Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry Since 1940*, 76: ‘Beginning with *H'm* in 1972 [...] Thomas's books have become sequences or quasi-sequences of an increasingly meditative or contemplative kind. The figure of “God” or “the god” is often discovered only in his “absence”, and these poems have been read as latter-day explorations of the traditional mystic notion of the hidden God or *Deus absconditus*’.

<sup>44</sup> Graham Ward in ‘Postmodern Theology’ (*The Modern Theologians*, 322-338), argues that theology, like any other academic discipline within the ‘postmodern world’, must be principally understood in terms of semiotic eclecticism: ‘Words like development, progression, advancement, meaning, profundity, and depths are supplanted by other words like dissemination, indeterminacy, deferral, *aporia*, seduction, and surface. Meaning is local, community is tribal, society is pluralistic, and economics is the pragmatics of the marketplace. This is the age of the sign’. 322.

<sup>45</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman, trans. Peter Winch (Blackwell: Oxford, 1980), 39.

the cataphatic or apophatic figurative representation ('God is/ is not *like*...'), any image of God must presuppose 'otherness' in order to function as an image in the first place. For an *image* to exist we must obviously be aware that it is 'not true', and therefore the 'hostility' between paradigm and representation in no way presupposes referential collapse. Northrop Frye, in his classic reading of Biblical *topoi*, phrases the central issue thus:

literature always assumes, in its metaphors, a relation between human consciousness and its natural environment that passes beyond— in fact, outrages and violates—the ordinary common sense based on a permanent separation of subject and object [...] All rhetorical figures have some feature that calls attention to their departure from what is normally taken to be the common-sense (descriptive) use of language. In simile, for example ("My love is like a red, red rose"), the word "like," for some readers at any rate, would convey a reassuring sense of "not really." The hyperbole calls attention to its exaggeration of the external facts, the synecdoche to its understating of them, the oxymoron to its paradox, the metonymy to the signified it replaces. But the metaphor conveys an explicit statement, based on the word "is", along with an implicit one that contradicts it. Just as myth says both "This happened" and "This can hardly have happened in precisely this way," so metaphor with the "is" predicate says explicitly "A is B" (e.g. "Joseph is a fruitful bough," Genesis 49:22), and conveys implicitly the sense "A is quite obviously not B, and nobody but a fool would imagine that Joseph really was," etc. Just as myth is counter-historical, asserting and denying its historical validity at the same time, metaphor is counter-logical.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *Words with Power: Being a Second Study of "The Bible and Literature"* (Harvest/ HBJ: London, 1990), 71-72.

John Sallis, commenting on the *Timaeus*'s separation of 'intelligible paradigm and sensible image', employs a similar line of argument to Frye:

what is said (in 52c-d of the *Timaeus*) is that by which an image is generated, the intelligible being that gives it its stamp, *does not belong to the image*, which is thus merely a phantom. Why not? Because of what the other saying says: as long as one thing is one thing and another is something other, neither of the two will come to be in the other, so as to become, at once, one and two. It is a matter of the determinateness of the intelligible, of its inviolable selfsameness: an intelligible being is simply itself, one with itself; it is not such as can enter into another or receive another into itself, so as to become both itself and the other, thus, at once, both one and two. Being selfsame, it cannot be other at the same time. Thus it is said that, denied the presence of the intelligible, the image must, as Timaeus says, "be generated in something other, holding to being in a certain way, on pain of being nothing at all."<sup>47</sup>

Images presuppose their antonyms in the same way that 'nothing' (or 'non-being') presupposes *something*, and therefore searching for the 'unknown' should really be approached as a process of removing the obstructions and hindrances to understanding in order to see what

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<sup>47</sup> 'Of the *Khôra*', *Epoche*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1994), 1- 12, 8. Sallis' emphases. Derrida, following Plato in the *Timaeus*, defines *khôra* as a 'space' between being and nonbeing. In a paper published two years after Sallis's piece, Derrida defines the term thus: 'Chora, the "ordeal of chora" would be, at least according to the interpretation I believed justified in attempting, the name for place, a place name, and a rather singular one at that, for that spacing which, not allowing itself to be dominated by an theological, ontological or anthropological instance, without age, without history and more "ancient" than all oppositions (for example, that of sensible/ intelligible), does not even announce itself as "beyond being" in accordance with a path of negation, a *via negativa*'. Jacques Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone', in *Acts of Religion*, 58.

is already there.<sup>48</sup> In this sense, the Nietzschean metaphysic of the ‘death’ of God should itself be inverted. God’s ‘death’ must properly be recognized as His beginning, for what is ‘dead’ is not God Himself, as it were, but whatever erroneous paradigm has misshapen our subsequent onto-theological conceptions. Our religious knowledge often suffers from a kind of epistemic astigmatism, with the fallacious archetype (‘God is/ is not *like*...’) concealing not only what is true, but the disfiguring interpretative methodologies we used in the archetype’s initial formulation.<sup>49</sup> ‘God is/ is not...’, far from functioning as an existential statement in regard to deific attributes, should be approached instead as an exegetical *fulcrum*. Apophatic and cataphatic propositions self-referentially draw attention to their own false binarism, thereby dramatizing or, to use Jasper’s term once more, ‘enacting’, their referential illegitimacy. To extend the argument, the predicative form ‘God is/ is not...’, once we understand that *any* predicate assumes its ‘other’, intimates ‘a double absence: a lost centre, but also the loss of the *myth* of the lost centre’, so as to ‘*redeem* what had been omitted or marginalized’.<sup>50</sup>

‘Petition’ (*H’m* 2), with its well-known acknowledgement that ‘Silence is best’, employs once more the *prosopopoeia* of God as reflected by, and confronted through, the

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<sup>48</sup> Zygmunt Bauman has stressed how ‘postmodernity can be seen as restoring to the world what modernity, presumptuously, had taken away; as a *reenchantment* of the world that modernity tried hard to *disenchant*’. *Intimations of Post-Modernity* (London, 1992), x. Cited in Ward, 325.

<sup>49</sup> Colin A. Anderson, in a review of Sallis’s *Chorology: On Beginning in Plato’s Timaeus*, draws attention to Socrates’s argument in the *Republic* that ‘dreaming is nothing other than *mistaking an image for its original*’. The *khôra*, says Sallis, ‘subverts the whole logic of identity and essence expressed in the phrase “as such,” and hence problematizes the very possibility of “*khora* itself” as though *khora* had an identity like any other being. We are firmly caught in a *double bind* that requires that we differentiate *khora* from its images while recognizing that such a differentiation is problematic and even impossible’. *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*, 2000.06.21, 2. My emphases. This ‘double bind’, like the deceptive ‘either/ or’ presupposed by the apophatic/ cataphatic distinction, is intended by Sallis to show the *khôra* is that which enables the possibility of *impossibility*, the bind itself representing a sort of epistemological ‘refiguring’, rather than the ontological ‘cessation’ envisaged by Heidegger. For Sallis’s critique of Heideggerean metaphysics, see his ‘The End of Metaphysics: Closure and Transgression,’ in *Delimitations: Phenomenology and the End of Metaphysics* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Indiana U. P., 1995).

<sup>50</sup> Geoffrey Hartmann, Foreword to *Screenplay and Essays on the Film Derrida*, Directors Kirby Dick and Amy Zierinf Kofman (New York: Routledge, 2005), 8. My emphasis. Derrida obviously found somewhat exasperating the many insinuations that his writing, in one way or another, was an assertion of nihilism rather than an attempt to lacerate the confusion from ideas so that the truth may be witnessed. For example, in answer to a question posed by Kristine McKenna of *LA Weekly* in November 2002, ‘What’s the most widely held misconception about you and your work?’, Derrida replied: ‘That I’m a sceptical nihilist who doesn’t believe in anything, who thinks nothing has meaning [...] Anyone who reads my work with attention understands that I insist on affirmation and faith’. *Ibid.*, 122.

dialogical vitality of silence. Thomas's intention in this poem is explicitly to challenge the false *mythos* of a 'reticent' deity as kindred with an 'absent' one. Silence *is* best, for only silence may correctly appropriate the 'enigma' of a God who forbids truth to 'defer/ To beauty', the image indicating, as in 'Spring Equinox' and 'Death of a Poet', that the aesthetic impulse may misrepresent what is actually there. Nevertheless, we would be judicious here to recollect that 'enigma' is derived from the Greek verb *ainissesthai*, 'to *speak* darkly', and is therefore ultimately suggestive of exclamation. The dialectical heart of the poem is again the sardonic self-cancellation of its own prevailing conceit. If God were *actually* silent, then clearly the supplication that truth submit to 'exquisiteness' would remain unanswered; however, the firm rejection of Thomas's request in the final clause ('It was not granted') shows that God has indeed heard and, furthermore, replied to, the poet's appeal—the silence *is* a reply. The poem is illustrative of syncretism rather than disconnection, with the *prosopopeia* of an 'elsewhere' (which is not the same as 'absent') but nevertheless communicative God, showing that *deific* silence may indeed be intensely voluble.

Thomas's theology seems similar to Jürgen Moltmann's dialectic of Cross *and* Resurrection; for Moltmann, 'godlessness' or 'godforsakenness' gives way to eschatological promise. The Moltmann connection is of considerable interest, for Thomas wrote the word 'prayer' vertically in capital letters next to the whole of the following passage in his own copy of Moltmann's *The Crucified God* (1972):

In that case, is there no "personal" God? If "God" is an event, can one pray to him? One cannot pray to an "event". In that case there is in fact no "personal God" as a person projected in heaven. But there are persons in God: the Son, the Father and the Spirit. In that case one does not simply pray to God as a heavenly Thou, but prays *in* God. One does not pray to an event but *in* this event.

One prays through the Son to the Father in the Spirit. In the brotherhood of Jesus, the person who prays has access to the fatherhood of the father and to the Spirit of hope. Only in this way does the character of Christian prayer become clear. The New Testament made a very neat distinction in Christian prayer between the Son and the father. We ought to take that up, and *ought not to speak of "God" in such an undifferentiated way*, thus opening up the way to atheism.<sup>51</sup>

The passage makes it abundantly clear that that the term 'God' necessitates meticulous interpretation. In a comparable sense, 'This One' (*H'm*, 3) seems interested in exploring the actual *denotation* of the term 'silence', or, within the context of the poem, silence's metonymic corollary, 'inaction'; 'abstaining' can be viewed as juxtaposing 'performing', with 'watching' both passive noun and energetic verb. Silence and inactivity in this poem are suggestive of an ontologically-charged event. *H'm* is in fact an extremely raucous collection, with the serene, pre-linguistic evolutionism of the opening poem 'Once' ('God looked at space and I appeared,/ Rubbing my eyes at what I saw', *H'm* 1), steadily superseded by the following poems' orally-centered, imagistic stridencies. The following images, for example, are all orally (or 'aurally') anchored: 'What is this? said God. The obstinacy/ Of its refusal to answer/ Enraged him'. ('Echoes', *H'm* 4); 'And one voice says: Come/ Back to the rain and manure/ Of Siloh' ('Invitation', *H'm*, 5); 'There was a time when wise men/ Were not silent, but stifled by vast noise'. ('Period', *H'm*, 6); 'Christen me, christen me,/ The stone cried'. ('The Epitaph', *H'm*, 9); 'the priest's words be drowned/ By the wind's caterwauling' ('The Island', *H'm*, 20); 'a clean/ Sky with the fish, speckled like thrushes,/ Silently singing among the weed's/ Branches'. ('The River', *H'm*, 23); 'There was a background of guns and bombs [...] One voice, quieter than the rest, Was heard' ('The Times', *H'm*, 25); 'And she spoke to him with the voice/ Of his

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<sup>51</sup> My emphasis. The text is held at the R. S. Thomas Study Centre.

own conscience [...] while her forked laughter/ Played on him' ('Female', *H'm*, 27); 'And God thought: Pray away, / Creatures; I'm going to destroy/ It [...] I listened to you/ Too long'. ('Soliloquy', *H'm*, 30); 'and one said/ speak to us of love/ and the preacher opened/ his mouth and the word God/ fell out' ('H'm', *H'm*, 33). Thomas throughout the volume appears intent on transforming our understanding of silence by smashing the idol of 'silence' as representative of divine muteness or deific absence, and is concurrently drilling *into* silence a theologically complex and cleverly subtle verbal music. To strengthen the argument via reference to *Neb*, the lines from Pindar's eighth *Pythian Ode* quoted by Thomas, 'Man is a dream about a shadow; but, when a gleam of sunshine comes as a gift from heaven, a radiant light rests on men, yes and a gentle life' introduce the following important reflections on some of the religious poems from *H'm*:

It is so easy to believe in God when you are on your knees with your eyes closed [...] But the memory would come of him on his knees in the church porch as far back as Manafon. He was neither inside nor outside, but on the border between the two [...] a poet is a chameleon. His privilege is to be able to change his mind and his attitude. For an honest person, it isn't possible to hold always to the same position [...] If a mortal being such as man could comprehend God, what kind of God would that be? In Thomas Aquinas's doctrine, God reveals himself according to the creature's ability to receive that knowledge, but of course never revealing all.<sup>52</sup>

This passage is not often mentioned in the secondary literature, presumably because its assertion of religious and imaginative 'flexibility' refuses to dovetail with those readings which

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<sup>52</sup> *Autobiographies*, 78-9.



posit Thomas as a theologically uncomplicated thinker— ‘God as silent’, ‘God as beyond human knowledge’, and so on. Like the argument from Moltmann quoted above, Thomas here suggests that it is the movement *between* apparently contradictory theological positions—*via negativa/ via positiva*; apophasis/ cataphasis; *Deus Absconditus/ Deus mortuus*—that furnishes theological thought with its intellectual vigour and argumentative energy. The ostensibly ‘concealed’ may still produce that which is visible, in the same way that in the Pindaric ode the silhouette is a precondition of the light breaking through so that the truth may finally be seen.

There is no need, many of the poems in *H’m* seem to suggest, to equate silence with religious privation or, in extension of this, to contrast human ways of knowing with putative divine ways. Each supposed ‘new gambit’ (‘Parry’, *H’m*, 12) in the theological language-game (‘God as abundant’; ‘God as vocal’) will itself be quickly confronted with a robust counter-maneuver (‘God as deficient’; ‘God as inaudible’). ‘Sauf le nom’, Derrida’s response to the papers discussing negative theology delivered at the Calgary Institute for the Humanities in 1992, draws attention to this ‘end of monologism’ entrenched within *both* apophatic and cataphatic signification:

[...] the singularity of the unknown God overflows the essence and the divinity, thwarting in this manner the opposition of the negative and the positive, of being and nothingness, of thing and nonthing [...] negative theology “consists,” through its claim to depart from all consistency, in a language that does not cease testing the very limits of language, and exemplarily those of propositional, theoretical or constative language [...] X “is” beyond what “is,” X is without being (X) [*sans (l’) etre*]. This hyperbole announces. It announces in a double sense: it signals an open possibility, but it also provokes thereby the opening of

the possibility.<sup>53</sup>

The paradoxical ‘hyperbole’ of apophasis as positing and simultaneously *surpassing* ‘images, figures, idols, rhetoric’,<sup>54</sup> is shown compellingly in ‘Via Negativa’ (*H’m*, 16). In this poem, the diction of ‘absence’ is maintained throughout by means of an accompanying language of substantiality:

Why no! I never thought other than  
 That God is that great absence  
 In our lives, the empty silence  
 Within, the place where we go  
 Seeking, not in hope to  
 Arrive or find. He keeps the interstices  
 In our knowledge, the darkness  
 Between stars. His are the echoes  
 We follow, the footprints he has just  
 Left.

The imagery here ‘self-negates’; the severe epithets ‘great absence’ and ‘empty silence’ are assuaged by the ensuing lexis of implied presence (‘echoes’, ‘footprints’), with the poem’s Johannine-referenced penultimate metaphor, ‘We put our hands in/ His side hoping to find/ It warm’, clearly redolent of theological affirmation. Moreover, the opening interjection, ‘Why no!’, appears more derisive than authentic, as if Thomas were somewhat wearily (and perhaps

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<sup>53</sup> ‘Sauf le nom’, 52-64. Emphases in original. Derrida’s paper is structured as a fictive dialogue to show the (unpreventable) dialectical multiplicity within apophatic statements.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

also acerbically) addressing those determined to interpret his religious verse as existentially desolate.<sup>55</sup> God *is* present—and again it cannot be overemphasized that merely because God’s nature defies ‘categorical’ classification it does not follow that ‘God statements’ are semantically vacuous—with the poem’s images of metaphysical insubstantiality pointing to a deity who exceeds monocular predication. The ‘interstices’ and ‘darkness’ (comparable again to Vaughan’s ‘dazzling darkness’), appear more celebratory than religiously ‘distressed’. ‘God’ cannot be established in the Cartesian or foundationalist sense, but *God* may still be found, and is both surrounded by, and contained by, the continually revolving, and evolving, carousel of metaphors and metonymies we use to construct reality.<sup>56</sup> To return to Derrida,

—However much one says, then, that beyond the theorem and constative description, the discourse of negative theology “consists” in exceeding essence and language, by testifying it *remains* [...] negative theology would be nothing, very simply nothing, if this excess or this surplus (with regard to language) did not imprint some mark on some singular events of language and did not leave some remains on the body of a tongue...

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. ‘Taste’ in *Laboratories of the Spirit* (35) where Thomas censoriously ponders upon, ‘critics’ compulsive hurry// to place a poet’.

<sup>56</sup> This is one of Mark C. Taylor’s central arguments in his *Deconstructing Theology* (Atlanta: GA, 1982). Taylor, while embracing plurality and creativity in ‘God-talk’, thinks that the ‘death’ of ‘God’ as (Derridean) transcendental signified results in a severely negativistic onto-theology, thus his neologism of theology as ‘a/theology’. This seems to me a mistake, as a careful reading of Derrida on the alleged opposition between ‘categories of thought/ being’ and ‘categories of language’ shows that he does not regard semantic ‘playfulness’ as equivalent to referential emptiness. Here, for example, is Derrida on the interplay between presence and absence in Heidegger’s interpretation of Greco-Western metaphysics (I have purposefully chosen an early Derridean text to illustrate that throughout his career Derrida was not contending that ontological ‘absence’ and semantic ‘vacuity’ were one and the same): ‘such a relationship (between ‘presence’ and that which ‘surpasses’ it ) can never offer itself in order to be read in the form of presence, supposing that anything ever can offer itself in order to be *read* in such a form. And yet, that which gives us to think beyond the closure cannot be simply absent. Absent, either it would give us nothing to think or it still would be a negative mode of presence. Therefore the sign of this excess must be absolutely excessive as concerns all possible presence-absence, all possible production or disappearance of beings in general, and yet, in some manner it must still signify, in a manner unthinkable by metaphysics as such. In order to exceed metaphysics it is necessary that a trace be inscribed within the text of metaphysics, a trace that continues to signal’. Jacques Derrida, ‘*Ousia and Grammè*: Note on a Note from *Being and Time*’, in *Margins of Philosophy*, 65. My parenthesis. Derrida’s essay was originally published in 1968.

—A corpus, in sum.<sup>57</sup>

By positioning cataphatic signification *within* apophatic discourse to the interpretative forefront, we can now argue that the *via negativa* of the poem's title is actually intent on ironic infringement of its own thematic logic. If apophasis were premised solely upon abortive semantics, if God (or 'God') were 'literally' unknowable (or 'unanalyzable'), then obviously *nothing* of any worth could be known of God, *including* the circumstances of His 'unknowability'. The simple fact we can and do speak of 'God' as denoting *something* (in the conventions of philosophical theism, God as omnipotent, omniscient, immanent, etc.; in the liberal postmodern theologies, God as beyond identity, *telos*, truth, etc.) shows that the appellation does carry meaningful semiotic import. This is an obvious assertion, perhaps, but one which is habitually overlooked in Thomas criticism. D. Z. Phillips, for example, in *R. S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God*, makes the crucial point that ' "God" is not a name at all'; however, a page later on he argues that Thomas, although seeing 'clearly the kind of talk of God which will not do', is unable to formulate, or even suggest, a theologically viable alternative.<sup>58</sup> We can compare Phillips' argument concerning deific 'predicates' with this passage—which Thomas highlighted in his own copy—from Charles Hartshorne's paper, 'The God of Religion and the God of Philosophy', in *The Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures* (1967/ 8):

The standard terms of religious philosophising—absolute, infinite, immutable,

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<sup>57</sup> 'Sauf le nom', 54-5. A 'corpus'—a nimble pun by Derrida—of theological affirmation must necessarily remain within *every* apophatic pronouncement because: 'the language of ab-negation or of renunciation is not negative: not only because it does not state in the mode of descriptive predication and of the indicative proposition simply affected with a negation ("this is not that"), but because it denounces as much as it renounces; and it denounces, enjoining; it prescribes overflowing this insufficiency; it mandates, it *necessitates* doing the impossible'. *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>58</sup> *R. S. Thomas: Poet of the Hidden God*, 119-20.

eternal, self-sufficient, necessary, universal cause—do apply to the God of religion, but they apply less simply and exclusively than has been supposed. God is *somehow* absolute, infinite, immutable, and supreme cause; but in such a fashion that he can *also* be relative, finite, mutable, and supreme effect. God comes under both sides of the basic contraries. On both sides he is different in principle from other individuals. He is cause in a radically unique or “eminent” sense; he is also effect in an equally unique sense; he is infinite as no one else is, but also finite as no one else is. I call this the “principle of dual transcendence”.<sup>59</sup>

Thomas’s organization of texts within collections often seems thematically crucial. The poem facing ‘Via Negativa’, ‘Making’ (*H’m*, 17)—which is also a counterpart to ‘Female’ (*H’m*, 27) and ‘Soliloquy’ (*H’m*, 30)—is a kind of deific interior monologue, where, with emblematic Thomasian irony, it is now *man*, as opposed to God, who is ‘missing’: ‘Quickly the earth/ Teemed. Yet still an absence/ Disturbed me’. This poem is philosophically as well as theologically significant, for although God is ‘in love with it [man]/ For itself’, He determines to grant man ‘freedom/ To love me’. This reference to man’s moral autonomy is perhaps an indication that Thomas is employing the ‘free will defence’ to resolve the problem of evil.<sup>60</sup> For our purposes, however, it is important to realize that it is God who is both speaking

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<sup>59</sup> Vol 2 (London: Macmillan, 1969), 162-3. Emphases in original. The text is held at the R. S. Thomas Study Centre.

<sup>60</sup> Thomas was deeply interested in the two ‘contrary sides of the human soul’ as Blake famously called them, as the following passage towards the end of the *Neb* attests: ‘We have already heard of the problem of killing as a part of the economy of the God of love. There is also the problem of the inventing mind. People like Roger Bacon continue to be born into the world, people who possess the kind of mind that can drive them to invent deadly and ruinous things. These are the people who are responsible for discovering nuclear energy with all its problems and temptations. And yet we believe that nothing exists outside God. It is he who contains everything. Therefore this element, too, is part of Him. If everything derives from Him, this element was bound to surface at some time. It is here that we see the genius of the Book of Genesis in being able to imagine the temptation in the Garden of Eden. It appeared to R. S. many times that it would have been far better had man not tasted the fruits of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. How often he has shown how unsuited he is to use that knowledge for the glory of God and the benefit of his fellow human beings. And yet it is equally difficult to imagine the earth without the mind of man probing and searching and challenging itself to make the best use of his discoveries and devices’.

to an ‘absent’ figure and also inculcating man with His disposition— man yearns for God, but God Himself craves companionship and dialogue. There are dialogically-grounded lacunae in *God’s* character until prelapsarian man is created and, because he is created in God’s image and likeness, the lacunae themselves are also transferred to him. Searching for a descriptive modality with which to adequately portray God is therefore an instinctive and primary occupation of thought, and should properly be understood as an expression of deific paternity. Our very grappings *with* language provide additional proof, as it were, of our language’s celestial origin. Language, to upend somewhat George Steiner’s famous conceit, is simultaneously pre *and* post Babel,<sup>61</sup> with ‘silence’ and ‘absence’ more psychologically and linguistically *distortive* signifiers than ‘unembellished’ ontological referents:

For R. S., as he grew older, it became obvious that many of the problems of religion arise in the wake of erroneous ideas concerning God, which cause us to ask erroneous questions. Our image of God must be transformed [...] This is the problem with which R. S. would wrestle increasingly in his life and in his poetry, as time went by [...] He became aware of the silence of God.<sup>62</sup>

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*Autobiographies*, 107. See also the Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*: ‘Without darkness, in the world we know, the light would go unprized; without evil, goodness would have no meaning’. *Selected Prose*, 66.

<sup>61</sup> Chrétien begins his study by noting that the first act of speech is *post-verbal*, for when Adam ‘names’ he must obviously already possess language. In addition, says Chrétien, it is pointless to use the Genesis narrative to suggest linguistic perfection or ‘prelapsarianism’, because Adam is obviously alone and therefore has nobody to *say* anything to. Chrétien also argues that this initial linguistic act was a form of ‘testing’. Man is challenged by God to find an *adequate* language with which to name the animals; therefore, before he may even begin his task, he has to be aware of his language’s potential insolvency: ‘This first act of human speech cannot [...] constitute the origin of speech or language. When he speaks for the first time, man does not enter language: he must already inhabit it. Indeed, as the very letter of the story puts it, God has already addressed man, has already spoken to him before man starts to speak, so that he will start to speak in his turn. Man has already listened, and so he has already replied, even if his reply was a silent one. As for the living things that man considers and names, they too have already had to obey the divine speech, if the miracle of their summoning and their gathering before man is to be possible. Speech is thus prior in two ways, preceding as it does, in its very dissymmetry, the first human speech. This first speech, far from coinciding with itself in the perfect transparency and plenitude of a language seen as original, is, in itself and in the way it is used, nothing but the discovery of its own inadequacy and failure’. *The Ark of Speech*, 1-2. If this is correct, then Thomas’ ruminations upon the ‘collapse’ of religious language are to be very much expected rather than taken as illustrative of the theologically ‘heterodox’.

<sup>62</sup> *Autobiographies*, 106-7. My emphasis.

There is a tangible Wittgensteinianism to this passage.<sup>63</sup> The destabilization of perceptual, linguistic, and epistemological presuppositions is seen as a necessary condition of mature theological understanding. It is not clear if Thomas knew the later Wittgenstein in any depth, but he certainly knew the *Tractatus*,<sup>64</sup> and it is therefore a reasonable assumption that he would also have acquainted himself with at least some of the subsequent work. George Steiner mentions both the *Investigations* and the *Tractatus* in his *Language and Silence* of 1967 and his *Real Presences* of 1989, two books which Thomas owned.<sup>65</sup> Again, it is intriguing to read the passages Thomas highlighted/ annotated:

Nowhere, however, is the retreat from the word more pronounced and startling than in philosophy. Classic and medieval philosophy were wholly committed to the dignity and resources of language, to the belief that words, handled with requisite precision and subtlety, could bring the mind into accord with reality. Plato, Aristotle, Duns Scotus and Aquinas are master-builders of words, constructing around reality great edifices of statement, definition, and discrimination. They operate with modes of argument that differ from those of the poet; but they share with the poet the assumption that words gather and engender responsible apprehensions of the truth. Again, the turning point occurs in the seventeenth century, with Descartes' implicit identification of truth and mathematical proof, and, above all, with Spinoza.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> In a sense all of the *Investigations* is relevant, but see especially paragraphs 33, 73-4, 352, 669-72 in Part I, and chapters iii, ix-xi (the chapters explicitly concerned with perception) in Part III.

<sup>64</sup> See *Autobiographies*, 166.

<sup>65</sup> Both texts are held at the R. S. Thomas Study Centre.

<sup>66</sup> *Language and Silence*, 38.

Even more interesting is Thomas's annotation to chapter 7, Part II, of *Real Presences*. The quotations from the chapter must of necessity be rather long, but it is clearly important to know the type of philosophical text Thomas was reading:

Deconstruction is theoretical. It is, to be precise, a meta-theory, which is to say a theoretical investigation and critique of all available theories of meaning and models of understanding. It aims to tease out the act of reading or of perceiving and interpreting the painting from the innocent or self-deluding carapace of this discourse. It would externalize, hold up for demolition, the epistemological assumptions implicit or explicit in judgements of aesthetic value and in interpretations of sense. Being itself a fundamental critique of the very possibilities of meaningful reading and hermeneutics, ironizing (though this is true only among its most rigorous practitioners) its own means of negative assessment, deconstruction privileges the discomforts of the theoretical, of the fragmentary, above the unexamined rhetorical complacencies and comely formalities which inhabit traditional poetics [...] For deconstruction [...] there can be no foundational speech-act, no immunity from un-saying. This is the crux. Developing, radicalizing a Nietzschean intuition, deconstruction knows that there is in each and every assumption of a correspondence (however subject to sceptical and epistemological query) between word and world, in each and every previous rhetoric of direct or indirect communication and reciprocal intelligibility between speakers, between writers and readers, a declared or undeclared delusion, an innocence or political-aesthetic cunning. The ultimate bases of such delusion, innocence or cunning, its final validation, are theological. Where it is consequent, deconstruction rules that the very concept



of meaning-fulness, of a congruence, even problematic, between the signifier and the signified, is theological or onto-theological [...] The archetypal paradigm of all the affirmations of sense and of significant plenitude—the fullness of meaning in a word—is a Logos-model. Derrida’s formulation is beautifully incisive: “the intelligible face of the sign remains turned to the word and the face of God”. A semantics, a poetics of correspondence, of decipherability and truth-values arrived at across time and consensus, are strictly inseparable from the postulate of theological-metaphysical transcendence [...] The notion of vacancy needs careful definition. Western theology and the metaphysics, epistemology and aesthetics which have been its major footnotes, are “logocentric”. This is to say that they axiomatize as fundamental and pre-eminent the concept of a “presence”. It can be that of God (ultimately, it must be); of Platonic “Ideas”; of Aristotelian and Thomist essence. It can be that of Cartesian self-consciousness; of Kant’s transcendent logic or of Heidegger’s “Being”. It is to these pivots that the spokes of meaning finally lead. They insure its plenitude. That presence, theological, ontological or metaphysical, makes credible the assertion that there “is something in what we say”. Deconstruction challenges this presumption of insured content, of cognitive ballast [...] The deconstructive programme follows on this postulate of absence. Nothing, either in the lexical or grammatical elements or in the system which they constitute—the code, the rhetoric, the formal convention—can be finally determined. Meaning is, as Terry Eagleton puts it: “a kind of constant flickering of presence and absence together. Reading a text is more like tracing this process of constant flickering than it is like counting the beads on a necklace. There is also another sense in which we can never quite close our fists

over meaning, which arises from the fact that language is a temporal process. When I read a sentence, the meaning of it is always somehow suspended, something deferred or still to come [...] and although the sentence may come to an end the process of language itself does not.” [...] There is always more to be said, there is always something new or contradictory to be added. There is in every proposal of interpretative context a potential of infinite regress, as there is, by illuminating analogy, in any appeal to subconscious motivations or intention.<sup>67</sup>

At the bottom of page 123 Thomas has written, ‘ “After the final ‘no’ there comes a ‘yes’ ” and underneath that, ‘ “The origin could have its origin.” ’ The first phrase is a direct quotation of the opening line from Wallace Stevens’s ‘The Well Dressed Man With A Beard’, printed in his first book, *Harmonium* (1923).<sup>68</sup> The second line is, ‘And on that yes the future world depends’, while the poem’s final line is, ‘It can never be satisfied the mind, never’. By referring to this poem at the end of these passages, it would seem that Thomas is drawing a distinction between deconstruction’s ‘negative’ postulations and the ways in which, notwithstanding or even despite such postulations, language and thought continue to demand the ‘positivity’ of existential commitment. The second phrase is more difficult to track, but it may be a reference to another Stevens poem, ‘The Idea of Order at Key West’, which concludes: ‘Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,/ The maker’s rage to order words of the sea,/ Words of fragrant portals, dimly-starred,/ And of ourselves and of our origins,/ In ghostlier demarcations, keener

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<sup>67</sup> *Real Presences*, 116-23. Emphases in original.

<sup>68</sup> Three important papers have been written on the connections between Stevens and Thomas: William V. Davis, ‘ “An Abstraction Blooded”: Wallace Stevens and R. S. Thomas on Blackbirds and Men’, in *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, 8:2 (1984), 79-82; Davis’s, ‘Wallace Stevens and R. S. Thomas: Influence sans Anxiety’, in *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, 30:1 (2006), 86-97; Tony Brown, ‘ “Blessings, Stevens”: R. S. Thomas and Wallace Stevens’, in *Echoes to the Amen*, 112-31. John Powell Ward also comments on the imaginative relationship between Thomas and Stevens in his *The Poetry of R. S. Thomas*, 74.

sounds'. If the 'rage' against chaos in a poem actually 'confers a blessing', as Robert Rehder says,<sup>69</sup> because, again, it provokes commitment in the face of despair, then—presuming that Thomas is thinking of Stevens's poem—we could connect the annotation in *Real Presences* to Derrida's idea that the paradigm of the 'origin', since it presupposes something else and so is not in fact 'originary', actually requires continual re-evaluation and critique. It seems clear that Steiner's analysis of hermeneutics—and especially his view that we must 'hold up for demolition, [our] epistemological assumptions'—was of considerable influence on Thomas.

An appeal to conceptual reassessment is noticeable in 'Remedies' (*H'm*, 24,), 'Between fierce alternatives/ There was need as always of a third/ Way', and also in 'Earth' (*H'm*, 28) with its explicit contention, 'We are misled/ By perspective'.<sup>70</sup> Notions of perspectival renewal are embedded within the concept of the pun,<sup>71</sup> and it would perhaps be advantageous at this point to consider the relevance of 'neb'—Thomas's greatest pun—and the word's connections with ostensive definition. For example, the Welsh word 'neb' may be interpreted as 'no-one' and 'someone'. Alternatively, we could interpret it as 'no-one'—i.e., no 'single' identity, alluding to the 'poet-chameleon' metaphor quoted above—or 'no-one' as in 'everyone' or 'anyone', thus suggesting that Thomas's apparent 'existential doubts' are, in fact, universal. It

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<sup>69</sup> *The Poetry of Wallace Stevens* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 144.

<sup>70</sup> On the Scriptural meaning of 'way' Northrop Frye is again instructive: 'In the Bible "way" normally translates the Hebrew *derek* and the Greek *hodos*, and throughout the Bible there is a strong emphasis on the contrast between a straight way that takes us to our destination and a divergent way that misleads our confuses. This metaphorical contrast haunts the whole of Christian literature: we start reading Dante's *Commedia*, and the third line speaks of a lost or erased way: "Che la diritta via era smarita" [...] Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to prepare a place for them, that they know where he is going, and consequently they know the way. They protest that they don't at all know where he is going, and therefore they can't possibly know the way. Jesus' answer "I am the way," explodes, or, perhaps, deconstructs, the whole metaphor of journey, of the effort to go there in order to arrive here. The metaphor of a journey modulates into the metaphor of an erect human body, with a head on top and feet underneath, with which we identify ourselves. Philip asks to be shown the Father, and gets the same type of answer: there is nothing there; everything you need is here. In the synoptics Jesus makes the same point in telling his disciples that the kingdom of heaven, the core of his teaching, is among them or within them [...] Once we form part of a body which is both ourselves and infinitely larger than ourselves, the distinction between movement and rest vanishes: there is no need for a way when the conception "away" is no longer functional'. *Words with Power*, 91-5. Thomas, too, seems to persistently attack the idea of disjunction between man and divinity. His religious verse demonstrates instead how apparently 'discordant' images of God are, in effect, foregrounding the same theological truth.

<sup>71</sup> The most incisive analysis of Thomas's use of the pun is by Damian Walford Davies. See ' "Double-entry Poetics": R. S. Thomas— Punster', in *Echoes to the Amen: Essays after R. S. Thomas* (Cardiff: U. W. P., 2003), 149-82.

may also be understood as a kind of proper name, ‘R. S. is no-one’<sup>72</sup> or as a self-negating title: ‘this is an autobiography about someone who does not exist’. Beginning as he does with the description of himself as ‘Nothing. No-one,’<sup>73</sup> Thomas’s profound interest in naming is evident throughout *Neb*. He expands the theme of himself as ‘selfless’ in the passages concerning his undergraduate days: ‘“Who does he think he is?” was the murmur he would hear from time to time. But he didn’t know who he was. He was no-one’.<sup>74</sup> He becomes ‘the rector’ and then, finally, ‘R.S’ at the mid-way point of the text. At the end of the book, however, he returns to the coupling of *abbreviated* name (‘R. S.’) and antithetical predicate. These literary devices perhaps mirror Thomas’s early personal and creative uncertainty, publishing as he did in his university magazine under the ‘Curtis Langdon’ and ‘Figaro’ pseudonyms before the first ‘proper’ poetry appeared. An interesting corollary to this is the latent Augustinianism of *Neb*. Augustine, in the first Book of the *Confessions*, refers to a similar early awareness of frustrated and perplexed selfhood:

Have pity, then, on me, O God, for it is pity that I need. Answer my prayer and tell me whether my infancy followed upon some other stage of life that died before it. Was it the stage of life I spent in my mother’s womb? For I have learnt a little about that too, and I have myself seen women who were pregnant. But what came before that, O God of my delight? Was I anywhere? Was I anybody? These are questions I must put to you, for I have no one else to answer them. Neither my father nor my mother could tell me, nor could I find out from the experience of other people or from my own memory. Do my questions provoke you to smile at me and bid me simply to acknowledge you and praise you for

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<sup>72</sup> *Autobiographies*, 105. My emphasis.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

what I do know?'<sup>75</sup>

The Augustinian text shows that knowledge of self and of divinity evolves through perspectival reassessment, and this theme is also apparent in the other 1972 collection *Young and Old*. This volume has somewhat passed beneath the critical radar (presumably, at least in part, because of its misleading classification as 'children's poetry') yet it contains several poems of substantial theological interest. As in *H'm*, the volume opens with a reference to the religiously mystifying, 'The great problems/ Remain, stubborn, unsolved' ('Young and Old', *YO*, 7) but, as if to directly rescind this, the pointedly-titled succeeding poem, 'Text' (*YO*, 8), underscores the theme of discontinuity between truth in *itself* and mutilating exegesis:

Over the continents come running  
 The scholars with ink in  
 Their hair. They fall to  
 Like lice on the interpretation.<sup>76</sup>

The dialectical and conceptual idiom of unnecessary investigation leading to intellectual puzzlement is picked up again in 'Islandmen' (*YO*, 15): 'our subjects/ Increase, burdening us/ With their detail'. A similar theme is also detectable in the Beckett-like 'Headline' (*YO*, 16), where the unpunctuated subject-predicate-object repetitions and splintered syntax whirling back into itself, suggest embedded conflict between thought's maneuverings and intentions:

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<sup>75</sup> *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 26. Two chapters after this, Augustine describes how he first became aware of the correlation between names and that which they signify, the passage in question being the one Wittgenstein uses to open the *Investigations*.

<sup>76</sup> The penultimate clause is reminiscent of the final stanza of Larkin's 'Days' from *The Whitsun Weddings*, another poem in which truth is contrasted with the ways truth is interpreted. It is interesting to speculate that Thomas may be consciously or subconsciously paralleling Larkin's attitude of mournful disparagement towards the intellectually unwarranted.

then is man  
 shot aimless  
 now and then  
 always yet  
 always is  
 man's aim and  
 always the  
 aim is man.

Here, the clamoring resonances of the signifiers contest the poem's thematic foreground, each lexical reverberation suggesting Thomas's broad argument that it is the nature of thought and language themselves which confound us. As Northrop Frye says, commenting on his earlier interpretation of kerygma in *The Great Code*, 'We are close to the kerygmatic whenever we meet the statement, as we do surprisingly often in contemporary writing, that it seems to be language that uses man rather than man that uses language'.<sup>77</sup> In 'Headline', and in several other poems within the collection, Thomas would appear to agree with this conjecture. 'Circles' (YO, 19), for example, employs again the theme of disfiguring 'intellect' as what we could gloss as a kind of *ouroboros*—the serpent with its tail in its mouth—to contend that it is our understanding and therefore our application of thought that is the problem. The poem's verbal interweavings and imagistic interlacings are expressive of thought's self-repudiating tendencies:

He seeks things that always withdraw

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<sup>77</sup> *Words with Power*, 116.

And finds them waiting on his return.  
 He takes his departure from God  
 And is as trash thrown away.  
 But a dream finds him and builds in him  
 And death comes and eats up the dreamer's  
 Brood [...]

so before death

Man is, and after death  
 There is more man, and the dreamer outlasts  
 Death, and the dreamer will never die.

Such images clearly represent the intensifying of religious consciousness—both for the poet himself and for men in general—and, as a conceptual implication of this, the continual and pressing need to *rethink* the religious paradigms which generated that consciousness in the primary instance. Onto-theological archetypes precede, in a sense, their actual or concrete understanding, so that consciousness becomes dependent on preordained schemata with the schemata themselves entrapping consciousness within an unavoidable double bind. Before the misleading archetypes, such as the unwieldy and bothersome apparatus of the apophatic/cataphatic bifurcation, may be definitively exploded, those archetypes must be interpreted by a consciousness formed *by* them. Therefore, the intelligence which wrestles *with* these archetypes, is also struggling, in a real and inevitable sense, with the very linguistic and epistemic nomenclature with which it was initially fashioned:

All these dissociations [sensible/ intelligible, form/ meaning, content/ form, signifier/ signified] mediatize, they provide means, they instrumentalize

language. They are themselves also means, essentially means destined to reduce to silence the speech of God, and our speech toward God. They deafen, they make us deaf to the sacred word or, what comes down to the same thing, they reduce God to muteness. They suppress or, if you will repress [...] something like a conjuration between God and us.<sup>78</sup>

It is in the context of jettisoning distortive theological archetypes that the well-known petition to leave ‘Godhead [...] To itself’ (‘Astronauts’, *YO*, 14), should be appreciated. Thomas is not urging a theology of extrincism—the idea that religious truth can only be received and therefore neither shown nor validated—but a theology within which the determinative paradigms themselves must repeatedly be attacked. Theological exegesis is both imperative and innately problematic; it is vital that we critically engage our formative archetypes (‘I stand here/ interpreting’, writes Thomas in ‘Budleia’, *YO*, 24), but the overpowering presentiment is to allow the disfiguring archetypes—‘God’ as opposed to God—to supplant, instead of assist, our critical activity. Incarnation may thus be hidden by *intelligence* and not, it is important to observe, by mere ‘emotion’; as was argued above, the emotionally-generated or ‘mystical’ denial that adequate linguistic communication with God is possible, collapses into mere idolatry. In this sense, our intellect must continually fight against the archetypes we employ. The volume’s final poem, ‘Lost Christmas’ (*YO*, 32), where *intellect* is shown in explicit confrontation with kerygma and Nativity, pithily summarizes this overall argument:

He has come far

Like the trees, matching their patience

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<sup>78</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano’, in *Acts of Religion*, 223.



With his. But the mind was before  
Him on the long road. The manger is empty.

Merleau-Ponty said, ‘My own words take me by surprise and teach me what to think’,<sup>79</sup> and in the important collection *Laboratories of the Spirit* (1975), there are many poems which have as their thematic mainstay an analogous attention to language as the originator, rather than simple repository, of intelligence, dialectic and, in particular, religious responsiveness. The opening poem ‘Emerging’ (*LS*, 1), in a delicate symbiosis of apophatic and cataphatic imagery, unifies the leitmotifs—which are of course interlocked in any case—of deific ‘silence’ and man’s understanding of the means by which the ‘voiceless’ and unresponsive deity should be articulated:

Hear my prayer, Lord, hear  
my prayer. As though you were deaf, myriads  
of mortals have kept up their shrill  
cry, explaining your silence by  
their unfitness.

It begins to appear  
this is not what prayer is about.  
It is the annihilation of difference,  
the consciousness of myself in you,  
of you in me.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Quoted by Derrida in ‘Force and Signification,’ in *Writing and Difference*, 11.

<sup>80</sup> Rowan Williams sees the poem—and also the poem with the same title in *Frequencies*—as foregrounding the impossibility ‘of speaking directly to God with any truthfulness’ and therefore also as an argument that ‘God happens when we are not looking for God (‘“Adult Geometry”: Dangerous Thoughts in R. S. Thomas’, 86-7). This interpretation, however, requires that the poem’s final entreaty to assemble a ‘laboratory of the spirit’ must

Difference or dichotomy, including the very desire *for* dichotomy, must be eradicated in favour of a theology of ontological and linguistic interdependence. This poem may firstly be viewed as an argument against the 'idolatrous' representation that deific uncommunicativeness is commensurate with absence, and secondly as a rebuttal of the theologically-skewed belief that God's refusal to submit to taxonomy is evidence of man's religious deprivation. Prayer is not located within a hierarchy of human worthlessness and celestial magnanimity, but denotes the 'hypostatic' self-expression of words merging with Word, human proclamation with divine kerygma, with the poem demonstrating further the architectonic judgment that *via negativa/ via positiva* binarism is both semantically counterfeit and theologically unserviceable. In connection with this argument, it is interesting to read the following passage, highlighted by Thomas in his own copy, from Tillich's *Theology of Culture* (1964):

all of these discussions going on about God being a person or not a person, God being similar to other beings or not similar, these discussions which have a great impact on the destruction of the religious experience through false interpretations of it, could be overcome if we would say, "Certainly the awareness of something unconditional is in itself what it is, is not symbolic." We can call it "*Being Itself*," *esse qua esse, esse ipsum*, as the scholastics did. But in our relationship to him we encounter him with the highest of what we ourselves are, *person*. And so in the symbolic form of speaking about him, we have both that which transcends infinitely our experience of ourselves as persons, and that which is so adequate to our being persons that we can say, "Thou" to God, and can pray to him. And these two elements must be preserved.

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be somewhat discounted, as 'laboratory' of course implies controlled and disciplined experimentation as opposed to non-constructed 'revelation'.

If we preserve only the element of the unconditional, then no relationship to God is possible. If we preserve only the element of the ego-thou relationship, as it is called today, we lose the element of the divine— namely, the unconditional which transcends subject and object and all other polarities.<sup>81</sup>

Religious invocation is reliant upon religious paradigms and therefore foreordained religious characterizations or anthropomorphisms, and it is these paradigms, characterizations and anthropomorphisms which must be assaulted if prayer is to be considered effectual. In an important series of passages in ‘Sauf le nom’, Derrida engages this very subject:

*There is* this event, which remains, even if this remnance is not more substantial, more essential than this God, more ontologically determinable than this name of God of whom it is said that he names nothing that is, neither this nor that [...] —Don’t forget that that is said in the course of a prayer. What is prayer? No, one should not ask “What is prayer?” prayer in general. It is necessary to attempt to think prayer, in truth to test it out (to pray *it*, if one can say that, and transitively) through this particular prayer, this singular prayer in which or toward which prayer in general *strains itself*. For this particular prayer asks nothing, all the while asking more than everything [...] Which interprets again the divinity of God as gift or desire of giving. And prayer is this interpretation, the very body of this interpretation.<sup>82</sup>

The common coin of prayer is dialogic *awareness*. In addition, prayer is dependent upon a prior

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<sup>81</sup> Paul Tillich *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford U. P., 1964), 59-60. The text is held at the R. S. Thomas Study Centre.

<sup>82</sup> ‘Sauf le nom’, 56. Emphasis in original.

undertaking of interpretation; Derrida's argument is that the *name* one uses to anchor prayer is what stimulates prayer in the primary instance. Phrased simply thus, however, the classic difficulty within both the *via negativa* and the *via positiva* seems to reemerge. The argument that prayer can only commence if one has initially established a 'name' for God entails that, because of the Exodic censure *against* speaking God's name, one is premising prayer upon a blasphemous 'interpretation' of God. Moreover, even if one *denies* God a 'name', then, because apophasis is simply cataphasis rearticulated, one still buckles God within a straitjacket of misinforming semantics. Therefore, regardless of how one initially approaches prayer, one is failing to appropriately comprehend *God*. As a consequence of this, we arrive back at the most awkward conundrum of all— how can we speak *of* and *to* God, if 'God' repudiates the ostensive act?

At this point, having shown that 'the *via negativa* conjugates reference to God, the name of God',<sup>83</sup> Derrida, using as an argumentative spur a maxim from Angelus Silesius's *The Cherubic Wanderer*,<sup>84</sup> asserts the predominant contention of his thesis in 'Sauf le nom':

*The place is itself in you.*

It is not you in the place, the place is in you!

Cast it out, and here is already eternity.

—The here of eternity is situated there, already: already there [...]

—The event remains at once *in* and *on* language [...] The event remains in and one the mouth, on the tip [*bout*] of the tongue, as is said in English and French, or on the edge of the lips passed over by words that *carry* themselves towards

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 56-7.

<sup>84</sup> Silesius's maxims are cited throughout Derrida's paper to provide a dialectical stimulus, as well as narrative framework, for his own reflections.

God. They are carried [*portes*], both exported and deported, by a movement of *ference* (transference, reference, difference) toward God. They name God, speak of him, speak him, speak to him, let him speak in them, let themselves be carried by him, make (themselves) a reference to just what the name supposes to name beyond itself, the nameable beyond the name, the unnameable nameable. As if it was necessary both to save the name and to save everything except the name, *save the name* [*sauf le nom*], as if it was necessary to lose the name in order to save what bears the name, or that toward which one goes through the name. But to lose the name is not to attack it, to destroy it or wound it. On the contrary, to lose the name is quite simply to respect it: as name.<sup>85</sup>

In these passages we see the culmination of, as well as solution to, the arguments and claims made, and the topics and difficulties engaged, within Derrida's seminal essay. We 'save' God's name by *losing* it, for by declining to 'name' God we are *respecting* God in His divinity; thus, our refusal to exercise the ostensive act in our worship of God is what guarantees God's necessary immanence *and* transcendence. However, this is not mere 'apophysis', for by 'losing' the name we are also making it *safe*: 'sauf le nom' as 'safe, the name'. Our refusal to interpret 'God' as name, means that we are venerating it *as* a name and not forcing onto it preconceived definitions and denotations.<sup>86</sup> God is therefore the 'unnameable *nameable*', because although He cannot be named, our very refusal to name Him establishes that we still regard 'God' as a

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<sup>85</sup> 'Sauf le nom', 57-8. Emphases in original. Cf. Jacques Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel', in *Acts of Religion*, 109-10: 'A proper name, in the proper sense, does not properly belong to the language; it does not belong there, although and because its call makes the language possible (what would a language be without the possibility of calling by a proper name?); consequently it can properly inscribe itself in a language only by allowing itself to be translated therein, in other words interpreted by its semantic equivalent: from this moment it can no longer be taken as a proper name'.

<sup>86</sup> There is in fact no adequate translation of 'sauf le nom', which is why Wood, Leavey and McLeod decide to remain with the original French. The best translation is perhaps 'except the name', meaning that 'everything except the name' is subject to ontological transference or referential slippage. This shows once more that 'God', although not a name as such, *does* generate meaningful signification.

referentially *evocative* signifier. Therefore, although in the context of prayer or supplication God's 'name' may be absent, we can still meaningfully address God through our acknowledgement that He *has* no 'name'— to employ a species of twofold *prosopopoeia*, 'God' is absent, but we are still speaking to and of *God* and He may still, if He so desires, *speak* in turn to us.

Understood in this manner, the whole apparently troublesome business of Thomas's refusal to 'name' God becomes something of a scholastic mare's nest. If God, by definition, *cannot* be named, then clearly Thomas's dismissal of 'God' as proper name is to be anticipated rather than termed 'heterodox', or judged in some way to reveal theological anomalies within his religious thinking. God does not need an 'interpreter' for 'God' does not exist; however, *God* may still require a *communicator*, that is, one who is able to show that 'God' is not God, and it is *this* characteristic of Thomas's religious verse that becomes increasingly noticeable from *Laboratories of the Spirit* onwards. In 'The Hand' (*LS*, 2), the poem immediately following 'Emerging', a 'speaking' God explicitly describes Himself as 'nameless': 'tell them I am'. This obvious reference to the Hebrew Tetragrammaton, or God as 'Yahweh' and therefore as possessing a name which is not a 'name', clearly shows that Thomas conceives of God as something akin to the Derridean 'unnameable nameable'.<sup>87</sup> In 'Mediations' (*LS*, 17) there is yet another appeal, formulated as in 'The Hand' through Mosaic diction, to unravel distortive theological archetypes:

I am the bush burning

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<sup>87</sup> This does not mean, of course, that the Tetragrammaton is devoid of meaningful denotation. For example: 'God's response to Moses' question— 'Ehyeh-'Asher-'Ehyeh—reflects a popular understanding that YHVH is to be interpreted in terms of the Hebrew stem *h-y-h*, "to be." Clearly, the name is not meant to be a mere identifying label. Such was not the function of names in the ancient Near East. Rather, the name is intended to connote character and nature, the totality of the *intricate, interwoven, manifold forces* that make up the whole personality of the bearer of the name. In the present case, therefore, God's reply to Moses means that the Tetragrammaton expresses the quality of Being. However, it is not Being as opposed to nonbeing, not Being as an abstract, philosophical notion, but Being in the sense of the reality of God's *active, dynamic presence*'. Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1987), 52. My emphases.

at the centre of  
 your existence; you must put  
 your knowledge off and come  
 to me with your *mind*  
 bare. (My emphasis)

Images of theological and intellectual *renewal* permeate the collection: ‘The Prayer’ (*LS*, 10), ‘But the prayer formed:/ Deliver me from the long drought/ of the mind’; ‘The Tool’ (*LS*, 11), ‘There was emptiness/and a face staring, seeking/ a likeness. There was thought/ probing an absence’; ‘Good Friday’ (*LS*, 12), ‘The darkness/ began to lift, but it was not the mind// was illumined’; ‘The Gap’ (*LS*, 37), ‘Somewhere between them and us/ the mind climbed up into the tree/ of knowledge, and saw the forbidden subjects’; ‘The Calling’ (*LS*, 50), ‘Learn the thinness/ of the window that is/ between you and life, and how/ the mind cuts itself if it goes through’. The best known poem combining the Mosaic conceit with an appeal for perceptual and intellectual rejuvenation is of course ‘The Bright Field’ (*LS*, 60), which concludes:

It is the turning  
 aside like Moses to the miracle  
 of the lit bush, to a brightness  
 that seemed as transitory as your youth  
 once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

It is instructive in this context to consider the following passage from *A Year in Ll^yn*, in which Thomas reemphasizes that perceptual rejuvenation is often necessary for *conceptual* understanding:

I was thinking today, while consulting *British Birds*, how meticulously good ornithologists observe a bird, noting every last feature. This leads naturally to the need to remember to stop and look at anything out of the ordinary that catches the eye. This is the time-honoured message of the Book of Exodus about the burning bush. ‘And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him...’ The message only reaches the person who stops and pays attention. For the careless and impatient everything is much of a muchness.<sup>88</sup>

Again, however, we must emphasize that these images and ideas are not suggestive of the ‘mystical’, unless we take ‘mysticism’ to mean ‘in *dialogue* with’. As was previously stated, mysticism, in a basic sense, entails that which is incommunicable, so if the image of the ‘bare’ mind simply implies ‘silence’ before God, then prayer, *mutatis mutandis*, would become impossible. Furthermore, to compound this overall dialectic of ‘decentering’ the inert ‘God’ so that God may be ‘released’, ‘The Reception’ (*LS*, 20) and ‘The Casualty’ (*LS*, 21) both accentuate the centrality of perceptual reawakening in religious thought: ‘The brown/ got into their minds/ so that they could not see God’ (‘The Reception’); ‘I lost the use/ of perspective’ (‘The Casualty’).<sup>89</sup> To compound the idea of perceptual recalibration as the foundation of theological understanding, ‘The Prisoner’ (*LS*, 52)—a poem in which the locution ‘*Deus*

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<sup>88</sup> *Autobiographies*, 121.

<sup>89</sup> In continuation of this theme, *Laboratories of the Spirit* contains several poems which turn on the idea of imagination as the *manufacturer* of reality. See for example, ‘Good Friday’ (*LS*, 12), ‘The carpenter/ had done his work well to sustain/ the carpenter’s burden; the Cross an example/ of the power of art to transcend timber’. This poem is counterweighed by ‘Mediations’ (*LS*, 17)—another poem in which God *speaks*—where the same image is used but this time represents imagination’s failure: ‘I/ will come to you in the simplest/ things,/ in the body/ of a man hung on a tall/ tree you have converted to/ timber and you shall not know me.’ See also ‘Dialogue’ (*LS*, 18), in which Thomas again stresses the effort required to *properly* exercise the imagination, “ ‘was I window/ or mirror?’// ‘You were my waste/ of breath, the casualty/ of my imagination’ ” and the cosmic hopefulness of ‘Scenes’ (*LS*, 44) where the appeal is to an imaginative reinterpretation of a previously misleading interpretation: ‘I have re-interpreted/ the stars’ signals and seen the reflection/ in an eternal mirror of the mystery/ terrifying enough to be named Love’.



*absconditus*’ actually appears—contains an unequivocal declaration to ‘give birth/ to the larger vision’.<sup>90</sup>

Towards the middle of the volume there is an interesting triptych of poems further exploring and combining the themes of speaking and non-speaking, identification or ‘naming’, and the difficulties arising from deific ‘classification’. ‘Tom’ (*LS*, 26) and ‘Farming Peter’ (*LS*, 28) are focused on a fabulist or mythologically-shaped awareness of God as ‘refusing’ the taxonomic paradigm, and ‘Ann Griffith’ (*LS*, 29), a piece dialectically counterbalancing these two poems, is largely composed of a peroration *by* God to the famous hymn-writer of Dolwar Fach. In this poem God is *determined* to ‘speak’, and speak, moreover, with compelling articulacy. The miracle at Cana becomes a metaphor for consciousness liberated from ‘the thin hymns of/ the mind’, the ‘spring water’ that God transforms into wine on Ann’s ‘unkissed lips’ symbolic of her union with Godhead alone; hence, the poem seems to foreground what A. M. Allchin has described as the ‘extraordinary vividness’ of Ann Griffiths’ religious imagination.<sup>91</sup> Ann Griffiths’ ability to both hear and respond to God’s ‘unspeaking’ voice is

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<sup>90</sup> David Bromwich in his *Times Literary Supplement* review (February 27<sup>th</sup>, 1976, 215) of *Laboratories of the Spirit*, notes the preponderance of ‘lens’ imagery throughout the collection. He admits, however, that he finds these images ‘baffling. [...] These [images] seem to be intended as metaphors for the body’s alienation from action and perception alike, but, if so, they are made to carry an emotional weight beyond their means’. Of course, if we interpret Thomas’s images of ‘perception’ as foregrounding not ‘alienation’ but perceptual rejuvenation and attach to this a reading of his religious work focussed on the dismissal of disfiguring theological paradigms, then the continual use of such images ceases to be problematic.

<sup>91</sup> A. M. Allchin, *Ann Griffiths: The Furnace and the Fountain* (Cardiff: U. of Wales P., 1987), 14. Thomas’s relationship with Ann Griffiths is complicated and a full examination of it falls outside the ambit of this thesis. She appears in two other poems, ‘Dead Worthies’ and ‘Fugue for Ann Griffiths’ in *Welsh Airs* (47, 50) and is also mentioned in the previously cited ‘Probings’ interview which contains the rather gnomic statement, ‘There is the God of Ann Griffiths as well as Augustine and Pascal’ (58). Interestingly, Allchin sees her as asserting *plurality* in Scriptural exegesis and combines this with a reading of her verse turning on the whole ‘presence within absence’ motif: ‘She takes it for granted that a sacred text has many levels of interpretation. So the experience of waiting, of feeling the absence of one whose presence is greatly desired is immediately referred by her to a greater and more universal experience; the situation of the believer when the sense of the Lord’s presence is removed, when God makes himself known to us only as a painful absence. [...] the words and promises of Scripture, the articles of Christian belief, the common structures of faith and life are still present, even when the Lord seems to have gone. For we notice here one of the primary characteristics of Ann’s mind, its great precision. She speaks of the absence of the visible countenance of the Lord. She knows in her faith that he is not really absent, even when he seems most painfully to be so’. *Ibid.* Allchin also draws attention to Ann’s apparent ‘relegation’ of the *purely* emotional in religious understanding, commenting that with the lines ‘Wele’n sefyll rhwng y myrtwydd/ Wrthrych teilwng o fy mryd’ from ‘Rose of Sharon’, she is stressing instead the primacy of *intellect*. *Ibid.*, 22. M. Wynn Thomas sees Ann Griffiths as an ‘ecstatic’ and interprets her hymns ‘as a translation of ancient anxieties about the unpredictable ubiquity of evil into the new Calvinistic language of sin, grace and redemption’ thus suggesting also the importance of *synthesis* in her work. *In the Shadow of the Pulpit: Literature and Nonconformist Wales*

contrasted with the speechlessness revealed in ‘Tom’ and ‘Farming Peter’. In the former poem, silence becomes not communicative but a mere gabble (“‘What did he say?’ ‘Yuh,/ yuh, yuh’”) and, in the latter poem, silence is a metonymy for disfiguring religious archetypes:

he was  
 buoyed up floundering  
 but never sinking scaled  
 by the urine of the skies deaf ears  
 to the voices calling from  
 the high road telling him  
 his Saviour’s face was of straw.

Continuing the argument that silence is expressive, ‘Scenes’ (*LS*, 44) induces us to absorb the eloquence of ‘a *language/* beyond speech’ (my emphasis). In ‘Alive’ (*LS*, 51), another poem which has at its centre the notion of perspectival dualism as emancipatory, God’s ‘voice’ is released through contemplation of His artistry both in its magnitude and compactness:

There

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(Cardiff: U. W. P., 2010), 27, 186. In fact, toward the end of his study of the intricate relationships between Welsh literature and dissenting culture, Wynn Thomas argues that Thomas was perhaps somewhat envious of Ann’s ability to unite Wales’ ‘two chapels’ (represented in the 1948 essay as ‘Maes yr Onnen’ and ‘Soar y Mynydd’): ‘his disillusion embraced the whole of a Wales that, in his eyes, had lost its soul in losing what, in its early, pristine, prime, the spiritual and cultural values of Nonconformity had represented. Thomas’s own attempt to find compensation for that loss by joining the older denomination of the Church in Wales had also ended in despair. His imagination was attracted to figures like Ann Griffiths of Dolwar Fach, who, as a Methodist *before* that powerful reform movement had split with the Anglican Church, could for him represent the perfect fusion of two contrasting modes of worship to which he felt so powerfully attracted’. *Ibid.*, 334-5. It may be that Ann Griffiths is, like Prytherch in some readings, an ‘alter ego’ for Thomas, but we can also view her as an argumentative *adversary* the engagement of whom allows Thomas to embrace and express his lifelong themes of theism/ non-theism, failed/ successful religious communication, and the interplay between ‘selfhood’ and ‘universality’.

is nothing too ample  
 for you to overflow, nothing  
 so small that your workmanship  
 is not revealed. I listen  
 and it is you speaking.

‘Speaking’ as unspeaking intonation and ‘nothingness’ as metaphysical completeness—a linguistic-ontological symbiosis which Derrida calls “‘at the edge of language [...] at the edge as language,” in the same as double movement: withdrawing [*dérobement*] and overflowing [*débordement*]<sup>92</sup>—is evident also in ‘The Calling’ (*LS*, 50), ‘learn silence// is wisdom’, and in ‘Sea-Watching’ (*LS*, 64). In this latter poem ‘emptiness’ becomes ‘presence’ and, in a return to the ‘waiting’ trope of ‘Kneeling’, postponement is transformed into an explicitly *active* occurrence: ‘a rare bird is/ rare. It is when one is not looking [...] that it comes’.

The final Aberdaron collections, *The Way of It* (1977) and *Frequencies* (1978), contain a number of poems which again contest the interconnected views that deific ‘silence’ is cognate with human privation, and that ‘mysticism’—in the sense of revelatory ‘visions’—is man’s solitary means of establishing contact with the divine. ‘Eheu! Fugaces’ (*WI*, 15), concludes with a startling image of ‘the wise man/ with his mouth open shouting/ inaudibly’, an image which obviously buttresses the idea that ‘soundlessness’, properly understood, may still entail volubility.<sup>93</sup> In ‘The Listener in the Corner’ (*WI*, 16) a parallel trope is cultivated. The imagery in this poem expresses the disparity between an understanding of silence *as* dialogue, and directionless, quasi-theological verbal swaggering:

<sup>92</sup> ‘Sauf le nom’, 60. My emphasis.

<sup>93</sup> The image of ‘inaudible screaming’ (stimulated, perhaps, by Munch’s painting) is used again to great effect in the final two lines of ‘Fishing’ (*F*, 11).

Last night the talk  
 was of the relationship of the self  
 to God, to-night of God  
 to the self. The centuries  
 yawn. Alone in the corner  
 one sits whose silence persuades  
 of the pointlessness  
 of the discourse.

We notice in this text that silence is suffused with rhetorical authority; for example, it 'persuades' rather than merely 'entices'. In 'Nuclear' (*WI*, 19), Thomas delivers his most unequivocal declaration yet that silence is both profoundly loquacious and the very register chosen and therefore *preferred* by God to communicate with creation:

It is not that he can't speak;  
 who created languages  
 but God? Nor that he won't;  
 to say that is to imply  
 malice. It is just that  
 he doesn't, or does so at times  
 when we are not listening, in  
 ways we have yet to recognize  
  
 as speech. We call him the dumb  
 God with an effrontery beyond

pardon. Whose silence so eloquent  
as his?

Here, in another challenging and doubly paradoxical ‘negation’, the *prosopopoeia* of God as ‘elsewhere’ yet nevertheless ‘speaking’ is itself contested. The poem disintegrates the metaphysic of God’s supposed absence by showing instead that *through* His taciturnity He is clearly present and, moreover, emphatically detectable. An equivalent supposition appears in the succeeding poem, ‘Praise’ (WI, 20), within which God speaks ‘all languages and none’. This image clearly links back to the censorious lines in ‘Nuclear’: ‘We call him the dumb/ God with an effrontery beyond/ pardon’. The contention that silence is communicative is also discernible in ‘They’ (WI, 28). In this poem a sequence of oxymoronic conceits (‘The new explorers don’t go/ anywhere [...] They interpret absence/ as presence [...] deep down is as distant/ as far out, but is arrived at/ in no time’), imply that the ‘abstruse code’ of silence may only be deciphered by those ‘new linguists’ willing to challenge and invert conventional interpretations of silence’s assumed characteristics. Silence *refers* to God but is beyond the *name* of God; to quote once more from ‘Sauf le nom’: ‘the negative procedure refuses, denies, rejects all the inadequate attributions [...]— the voice that speaks through its mouth: *aletheia* as the forgotten secret that sees itself thus unveiled or the truth as promised adequation. In any case, desire to say and rejoin what is *proper* to God’.<sup>94</sup>

*Frequencies* perhaps contains Thomas’s most thorough investigation of silence as *praxis* or sustained articulation. The volume comprises numerous poems intended to foreground the essential polyvocality of God’s ‘unspeaking’ voice. The opening poem, ‘The Gap’ (F, 7-8), is constructed around the opposition between God’s ‘eternal/ silence’—meaning, within the context of the poem, our often confused understanding of deific ‘transcendence’—

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<sup>94</sup> ‘Sauf le nom’, 69. Derrida’s emphasis.

and man's desire to find a name for God, or a theologically 'realistic' *imago dei*:

He leaned  
 over and looked in the dictionary  
 they used. There was a blank still  
 by his name of the same  
 order as the territory  
 between them, the verbal hunger  
 for the thing in itself.

William V. Davis sees these lines as representative of 'a kind of human babel growing upwards like a tower toward God and seeping into his unconscious' and regards the 'verbal hunger' as shared reciprocally by God and man: 'If God is Word, and can only be met through words, then, even if he never responds, the gap between God and man can only be closed (if indeed it ever can) through words sent back and forth through prayers and poems'.<sup>95</sup> This reading obviously hinges on a prior onto-theological construal of God, because if God is 'absent' then descriptions of God in the indicative or declarative moods must necessarily fail. However, if we choose a *semantic* as opposed to metaphysical definition of God to commence our interpretation of the poem—if we decide that Thomas here is interested in 'God' and not *God*—then the poem appears to reinforce a presupposition of God's actual presence. It is perfectly possible to contend that in 'The Gap' Thomas is disclosing how an anthropomorphic representation of the deity (and the God depicted here is heavily anthropomorphized) disfigures God and replaces Him with 'God', and, if that is the case, then we can also contend that Thomas is showing the defacing role of the archetype, or foreordained paradigm, in theological

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<sup>95</sup> 'Gaps in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas', 87, 89.

description. If God *Himself* ‘renounces’ monocular predication, anthropomorphic or otherwise, then clearly there is no need either to manufacture a semiotic system with which to ‘capture’ His nature, or to maintain that God’s repudiation of the ‘classificatory’ is illustrative of a kind of aberrant ‘immanentism’. ‘God’, continues Davis, ‘hopes that the gap is wider than he imagines, that man and his words are farther away than they seem to be’,<sup>96</sup> but ‘gap’ also denotes ‘aperture’ or ‘space’, and it may well be that in this poem Thomas is attempting to express that God’s nature must not be padlocked within the crippling ‘lexicographical’. For example, we can read the ‘spaces’ or ‘blanks’ contiguous to/ with His ‘name’ as evidence that God is ‘independent’ of both apophatic and cataphatic depiction. Again, Thomas seems to argue, our overriding compunction (‘the grammarian’s/ torment’) is to *coerce* rather than cancel the copula. We feel compelled to continue with the persuasive misrepresentation that the syntactic forms ‘God is/ is not...’ are referentially inflexible and dialectically conflictive. Instead, we should admit that what is actually required is to, ‘abandon him, that is, at once to leave him [but] Save his name [...] which must be kept silent [...]: Abandon seizes God; but to leave God Himself/ Is an abandonment that few men can grasp’.<sup>97</sup>

Abandonment or relinquishment of the copula, where the copula is employed to affirm that ‘God-talk’ necessitates a metaphysical ‘either/ or’, is also indicated in the concluding stanza of ‘At It’ (*F*, 15). In this poem the speaker thunders with ‘eloquence’ at the ‘silence beyond right and wrong’, the contrapuntal imagery suggesting that God’s ‘silence’ may indeed be verbalized and therefore that deific ‘unspeaking’ is still communicative. In ‘Night Sky’ (*F*, 18), which contains at its structural centre the explicit contention that Godhead is, ‘a statement beyond language/ of conceptual truth’, Thomas once more foregrounds a prosopopeial understanding of deific silence. Here, the trope’s ironic pliability covers a threefold negation: Godhead *is* a ‘statement’, that is, a *speaking* or declarative *action*, but this action disavows

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>97</sup> ‘Sauf le nom’, 79. The couplet is again taken from Silesius.

itself by means of a truth, which can itself be stated (as Thomas himself has done within, and through, the poem), yet is nevertheless outwith the ‘conceptually’ and therefore ‘grammatically’ correct. Once more we are presented with a ‘third way’, an alternative methodology, with which we may appropriate deific ‘reticence’. Thomas gives a de-negation of an ‘introductory’ negation—and so establishes the motif of negation as *reaffirmation*—in order to challenge the idolatrous understanding of silence as deprivation, and to clear a pathway through silence’s plentiful and often misunderstood aporias.<sup>98</sup> In these poems aporia is language, for aporia, like silence, cannot exist without a preceding awareness of, and acceptance of, its various antonyms. Silence demands loquacity in the same way that aporia demands closure or absence demands presence; as Derrida says by means of an aptly religious metaphor, *any* signifying system is, unavoidably, a form of ‘wounded writing that bears the stigmata of its own proper inadequation: signed, assumed, claimed’.<sup>99</sup>

‘Henry James’ (*F*, 20) restates the broad theme of silence paralleling fluency (‘It was the eloquence of the unsaid/ thing’) and coalesces this with another oxymoronically-fashioned argument that metaphysical ‘deficiency’ contains the anticipation of surfeit:

It was the significance  
 Of an absence, the deprecation  
 Of what was there, the failure  
 To prove anything that proved his point.

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<sup>98</sup> Cf. ‘Sauf le nom’, 83-4: ‘What would a path be without aporia? Would there be a way [*voie*] without what clears the way there where the way is not opened, whether it is blocked or still buried in the nonway? [...] Understand me, it’s a matter of maintaining a double injunction. Two concurrent desires divide apophatic theology, at the edge of nondesire, around the gulf and chaos of the *Khôra*: the desire to be inclusive of all, thus understood by all (community, *koine*) and the desire to keep or entrust the secret within the very strict limits of those who hear/ understand it *right*, as secret, and are then capable or worthy of keeping it [...] Understand me when I say that, I am still citing Silesius, in this sort of *post-scriptum* that he adds to the maxim on “The blessed silence (*Das seelige Stilleschweigen*)” (1: 19). It is a matter of rightly understanding a silence’.

<sup>99</sup> ‘Sauf le nom’, 61. My emphasis.



Richness is in the ability  
Of poverty to conceal itself.

In this poem (presumably concerning the renowned circuitousness of James's later style), the novelist's 'failure' to engage the straightforwardly communicative is the foundation of his virtuosity. The text's succession of antithetical conceits, like the 'negations' in 'Night Sky', draws attention to the preeminence of defamiliarisation in conceptual discernment. Similar assertions appear in 'Dialectic' (*F*, 24) and 'Shadows' (*F*, 25), where in the former poem God speaks through the 'silent' language of number, and in the latter where Thomas again accentuates both the entrenched prolixity of speechlessness, and the paradoxical, revelatory discourse of the *theologia crucis* :

And so I listen  
instead and hear the language  
of silence, the sentence  
without an end.

I will open  
my eye on a world where the problems  
remain but our doctrines  
protect us. The shadow of the bent cross  
is warmer than yours. I see how the sinners  
of history run in and out  
at its dark doors and are not confounded.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> A. E. Dyson suggests that Thomas's 'Cross' metaphors often represent, 'the image of evolved man, alone in a creation where God is dead [...] held in exact silhouette against the other image of Christ on the Cross, when God is absent. If the Christian religion has this paradox at its heart, perhaps it is not irrelevant to modern doubt after all, but simply an anticipation of it by 2000 years'. *Yeats, Eliot and R. S. Thomas: Riding the Echo*, 304. With due

The reference to protecting ‘doctrines’ seems heavily ironic. We must *not* let doctrines—in the sense of one-dimensional ‘orthodoxies’—form the bedrock of our religious thinking. Received and *unchallenged* orthodoxies may provide a sense of intellectual security, but they also serve the purpose of *blunting* spiritual awareness. In this poem, Thomas seems to be combining several important ideas: if we ‘open’ our eyes to deific reality then we will ‘see’ that God is sometimes ‘silent’; consequently, we will then realize that simplistic, theological edicts, mislead rather than illuminate. In the same way that a shadow can *also* illumine—in the sense of it providing sharper outlines to whatever is *not* shadowed—a proper and ‘clear-sighted’ understanding of the ‘shadowy’ paradoxes of Christianity (God deciding to hang *Himself* on a cross) will show us that Christian paradoxes are not actually paradoxical. Our ‘doctrines’, in other words, must be continually challenged and *recalibrated* if they are to make any sense at all.

‘Abercuawg’ (*F*, 26, first published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 30<sup>th</sup> May, 1975) cannot of course be fully understood without reference to the Cardigan Eisteddfod lecture of one year later. Despite his ironic declaration that he knows little of ‘linguistics and philosophy’, Thomas in his lecture marshals a battery of philosophical examples and observations pertaining to ‘the whole problem of names, and words, and things, and the connection between them’.<sup>101</sup> The particular *nature* of the ostensive act is the lecture’s fundamental theme, for the other

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deference to a scholar of Dyson’s reputation, there are perhaps one or two confused ideas here. Presumably Dyson’s interpretation of an ‘absent God’ is stimulated by his understanding of the famous, ‘Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?’ of Matthew 27: 46, but this of course is a direct quotation from Psalm 22—the ‘Suffering Servant’ Psalm—and in citing it at the moment of death, Christ is proclaiming the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecy. Also, ‘modern doubt’ is rather an ambiguous phrase, for if Dyson means by it the abandoning of Christian ‘metanarratives’ as a consequence of Enlightenment rationalism, then he is assuming that these metanarratives were the only *loci theologici* of tradition. As has been pointed out, however, the surrender or dispersal of ‘transcendence’ is as much a part of Christian orthodoxy as a dogmatics which covets its retention. With specific reference to ‘Shadows’, the final line obviously prefigures what Thomas in his short *The Listener* piece ‘Where do we go from here?’ called ‘The great hymn of the Christian Church, the *Te Deum Laudamus* [which] closes on the humble yet proud verse: “In Thee, O Lord, have I trusted, let me never be confounded”’. *Selected Prose*, 151.

<sup>101</sup> *Selected Prose*, 156.

topics and issues engaged—the complicated interplay between bilingualism and untranslatability, the relationship between ‘dreams and reality’, the character of aesthetic innovativeness—are dependent for their elucidation on Thomas’s initial argument that responding to the conundrum of naming ‘is man’s constant aspiration’.<sup>102</sup> One cannot exist without naming, but naming remains simultaneously uncomplicated *and* problematical; although ‘words are our chief tools for dealing with [things] and keeping them in place [...] sometimes language succeeds too well’, and instead of perceiving a ‘thing’ we become confused by its linguistic representation:

So skillful are some of the great masters of words that they create figures which are more real than reality itself, as it were. Take Shakespeare’s Hamlet for example. Is not Hamlet more alive than the various Robert Williamses or John Smiths of whose existence I have certain and unambiguous proof? Such a man as Hamlet never existed. But what am I saying? [...] Does Abercuawg exist? That is the question. And what is existence? [...] It is not necessarily facts which decide the course of man’s life, but words.<sup>103</sup>

The lecture and poem have variously been explained as an adaptation of the ‘presence within absence’ motif.<sup>104</sup> Such readings, however, whilst enabling important critical attention to be focused on the discrepancy between ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ existence, do not perhaps sufficiently emphasize the fact that in both texts a concentration on language itself provides the ‘frame narrative’ for Thomas’s subsequent reflections. In the lecture, for example, Thomas offers his own Zeno-like paradox concerning the definition of ‘few’ and ‘many’ (a variation of

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 159-60.

<sup>104</sup> See for example, Marie-Thérèse Castay, ‘The Self and the Other: the Autobiographical Element in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas’, 127; Phillips, 127; Davis, 30.

one of metaphysics' classic puzzles) to show that the concept of quantity is often distorted by our verbal ascriptions. A page later on Thomas alludes to Popper's famous 'falsification' argument to further indicate that one does not seek to prove but rather *disprove* hypotheses, thereby stressing again the significance of linguistic 'bewitchment' in conceptual delineation. The Popperian allusion, in fact, is of considerable interest in itself. Popper's view that inductivism must be replaced by empirical falsification (meaning that scientific hypotheses cannot be verified but only falsified) is similar, we could argue, to Thomas's contention that 'accurate' theology consists largely in the jettisoning of the erroneous religious paradigms and archetypes so that the truth may be both witnessed and released.<sup>105</sup> It is in this, and not in some 'mystical' sense, that the oft-quoted description of Abercuawg as 'the process of becoming' should be understood. Unlike the metaphysically static Platonic Forms, Abercuawg is not, and does not appertain to, 'something beyond the process of change'<sup>106</sup> but is instead a method or *technique* of thought itself. With its 'indefinable point,/the incarnation of a concept', Abercuawg is comparable to the 'still point of the turning world [...] neither arrest nor

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<sup>105</sup>To accentuate again the contemporaneity of Thomas's linguistic/metaphysical views, the hugely influential twentieth century logician and philosopher of language W. V. O. Quine in his *Word and Object* of 1960, argued that truth is dependent on a linguistic system in its *entirety* and is therefore not a consequence of *individual* propositions. In other words (although Quine himself was an atheist) a statement of form 'God is X' does not refer to an 'ontological' relationship between 'God' and 'X' at all, but rather to the nexus of propositions within which the statement 'means'; thus the term 'semantic holism' to describe Quine's theory. A repercussion of this is that synonymy has no operative value (what Quine called 'indeterminacy of translation'); to use the same example, 'God' does not refer to 'one thing' but to a *frame* of reference, the various points of connection giving meaning to the subject-term. In addition, it was in *Word and Object* that Quine made famous Otto Neurath's analogy of the boat to show that any knowledge claim (or archetype) may be discarded if evidence is shown to falsify it, yet 'the hull', at least in part and for a certain period of time, must necessarily remain: 'Neurath has likened science to a boat which, if we are to rebuild it, we must rebuild plank by plank while staying afloat in it [...] Our boat stays afloat because at each alteration we keep the bulk of it intact as a going concern. Our words continue to make passable sense because of continuity of change of theory: we warp usage gradually enough to avoid rupture [...] We are limited in how we can start even if not in where we may end up. To vary Neurath's figure with Wittgenstein's, we may kick away our ladder only after we have climbed it'. Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (Massachusetts: M.I.T & John Wiley, 1960), 3-4. Without wishing to overstrain the nautical metaphor, Thomas also seems intent on pointing out that certain of our archetypes and paradigms must be rebuilt whilst nonetheless remaining to steer our consciousness. The archetypes and paradigms they are navigational *aids* rather than ports of call in themselves, and we must always be aware that they may themselves be thrown overboard if their utility becomes outmoded.

<sup>106</sup> *Selected Prose*, 162.

movement' of 'Burnt Norton'<sup>107</sup> or, to apply a more theoretic gloss, a *form* of thinking similar to that christened by Lacan as 'jouissance'; that is, Abercuawg represents the *processes* by which one goes beyond oneself in order to abolish intellectual equipoise and thereby develop oneself with regard to the richness and effervescence of Being. Hence, although Abercuawg 'cannot be grasped by the mind alone',<sup>108</sup> recognizing its paradoxical vitality is still a consequence of 'cerebral' rather than 'intuitive' reasoning. Similar to Derrida's characterization of the precepts of negative theology (or 'apophatic theologemes')<sup>109</sup> as concurrently 'withdrawing' and 'overflowing', it is only through *intellectual* acknowledgement that 'Abercuawg' is not Abercuawg—and therefore that our foreordained paradigms are deficient—that the necessary paradigm shift is able to occur. Nevertheless, as those foreordained paradigms *themselves* stimulate such a reaction, it is impossible, on pain of absurdity, to entirely abandon them. 'It is one of the consolations of philosophy', says Quine, 'that the benefit of showing how to dispense with a concept does not hinge on dispensing with it'.<sup>110</sup> The name 'Abercuawg' is not Abercuawg any more than 'God' can be regarded as cognate with God. The confusion arises from the replacement of the metaphysical referent with the linguistic signifier; as Thomas writes in the poem's second stanza: ' "This is the name,/ not the thing that the name/ stands for." I have no faith/ that to put a name to/ a thing is to bring it/ before one.' Furthermore, if we wish to properly know Abercuawg or God—although in a purely epistemic-ontological sense, of course, the terms are interchangeable—then we must

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<sup>107</sup> In the 'April' section of *A Year in Llŷn*, Thomas quoted from 'Burnt Norton'—'Human kind cannot bear very much reality'—to bolster his criticism of the Church in Wales's liturgical reforms. The passage is interesting, for Thomas is again at pains to stress the differences between deity in itself and man's construal of deific characteristics: 'The pinnacle of the original service was when I, as a priest, would say the words of consecration over the bread and wine, with my back to the congregation as one who had the honour of leading them to the throne of God's grace. But now it is the congregation that the priest faces, inviting them to speak, as he breaks the synthetic wafer before them. It is to God that mystery belongs, and woe to man when he tries to interfere with that mystery'. *Autobiographies*, 131.

<sup>108</sup> *Selected Prose*, 162.

<sup>109</sup> 'Sauf le nom', 61.

<sup>110</sup> *Word and Object*, 190. The comment comes at the end of a chapter subtitled 'Definition and the Double Life' in which Quine argues for 'holism' rather than 'singularity' in conceptual delineation.

eradicate all notions of either expression as fundamentally denotative. ‘Abercuawg’ is an *activity* in the same way that ‘God’ demands *praxis* or, as Thomas says in ‘Where do we go from here?’ (and we must pay particular attention to the absence of inverted commas around the subject-term): ‘There is no God but God. The very *use* of the word answers all questions’.<sup>111</sup>

‘The Signpost’ (*F*, 28) concerns similar ironic equivalences *and* dissimilarities implanted within our understanding of ‘movement’. The poem’s extended metaphors of ‘travelling’ and ‘arrival’ (‘Casgob, it said, 2/ miles. But I never went/ there; left it like an ornament/ on the mind’s shelf [...] I need a museum// for storing the dream’s/ brittle particles in’) are expressive of thought’s self-retracting characteristics or properties. Emphasis on movement as instantaneously dynamic and inactive is also conspicuous in ‘Adjustments’ (*F*, 29), where Thomas again combines the themes of abortive predication and perceptual revision:

I dare not name him  
 as God. Yet the adjustments  
 are made [...] To demolish  
 a mountain you move it stone by stone  
 like the Japanese. To make a new coat  
 of an old, you add to it gradually  
 thread by thread, so such change  
 as occurs is more difficult to detect.

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<sup>111</sup> *Selected Prose*, 151. My emphasis. The entire essay turns on the idea of ‘movement’ in order to achieve an understanding of the numinous. Paradox is again central to Thomas’s principal argument, for once we appreciate the various erroneous *usages* of the term ‘God’, then we finally comprehend that in order to ‘find’ Him, ‘there is no need to go anywhere from here’. *Ibid.*, 152. ‘Nothing is hidden’, as Wittgenstein famously said in paragraph 453 of the *Investigations*, yet our predominating impulse is to allow our thinking to be controlled by our language and not the other way about. Wittgenstein was deeply interested in this idea throughout his life, as the following (practically Derridean) extract from a letter written from the Russian Front to Paul Engelmann in response to a poem by Johann Ludwig Uhland makes clear: ‘The poem by Uhland is really magnificent. And this is how it is: if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then *nothing* gets lost. But the unutterable will be—unutterably—*contained* in what has been uttered!’ Cited in Fergus Kerr, *Theology after Wittgenstein* (London: SPCK, 1997), 166.

The Yeatsian conceit of tailoring a descriptive modality which afterwards will be discarded, segues into the second stanza's edict that 'We must change the mood/ to the passive', another noteworthy pun pivoting once more on the idea of negation as a form of reaffirmation or endorsement. Passivity cannot of course exist without the possibility of animation: by deciding to do 'nothing' we are still *doing* something.<sup>112</sup> The grammatical passive mood combines the auxiliary verb with the past participle of the transitive, and is therefore, despite appearances to the contrary, a syntactic construction fixed upon engagement and activity. 'It is/ *how you play*' says Thomas in 'The Game' (*F*, 31, my emphasis) which will determine the outcome of thought's self-engaging contest. If we allow our thinking to exist in subservience to our language ('Face to face? Ah, no/ God; such language falsifies/ the relation', 'Waiting', *F*, 32) then we become trapped within an inevitable twofold predicament: our failure to understand the nature of our religious language means that the religious language we determine to use garbles further our theological conjectures. The paradigm of God as 'God' must be demolished ('letting/ your name go', 'Waiting') for only then will we apprehend 'a piece/ of the universal mind' ('The Possession', *F*, 33)—'piece' perhaps also suggesting 'peace'—with *movement* between dialectical opposites and antithetical theologies not an antecedent to locating truth but the nucleus of truth itself.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Cf. 'Nothing. What is nothing? [...] "Nothing is nothing" is an ambiguous proposition to say the least. But "Dim ydyw dim" is quite clear and final. What the English suggests is: "Nothing is without existence" [...] Nothing does not exist. And yet one cannot conceive of this nothing. That is the mistake which the brain always makes. People tend to think that the original state is a void and that being is something which comes and fills that void. We speak of presence and absence. But we can never become conscious of absence as such, only that what we are seeking is not present. Only being is real therefore. "Nothing" cannot be conceived, as I have just said. Try. You cannot. There is always something present. Fall back on language. Call out: NOTHING! It is totally meaningless'. 'Abercuawg', 159-164. Cf. Neurath's rather droll comment on the famous final sentence of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: 'If one really wishes to avoid the metaphysical attitude entirely, then one will "be silent" but not "about something"'. *Logical Positivism*, ed. A.J. Ayer (London: Free Press, 1959), 248.

<sup>113</sup> Davis (65) sees 'The Possession' as 'an important transitional poem', meaning that Thomas is alluding to the possibility of some type of limited (i.e. 'mystical') communication with God. The poem's closing image of 'infinite darkness between points of light', however, is obviously redolent yet again of Vaughan's 'dazzling darkness', while the graphic solidity of the adjective 'fused' to describe prayer in the second stanza, suggests that the act of praying involves unification or alliance.

Returning to the argument of double negatives yielding positives, ‘Perhaps’ (*F*, 39) advises us to ‘distrust the distrust/ of feeling’ and, by means of another sardonic ‘travelling’ image, defines the fruitless pursuit of God as ‘the crossing/ of a receding boundary which did not exist’. Thus, for a third time within the volume, Thomas indicates that in order to ‘find’ God ‘there is no need to go anywhere’ at all.<sup>114</sup> ‘Emerging’ (*F*, 41) stresses afresh the falsifying ‘anthropomorphisms/ of the fancy’ and also galvanizes the collection’s overall claim that religious comprehension is a matter of ‘systematized’ as opposed to ‘revelatory’ thinking:

We are beginning to see  
 now it is matter of the *scaffolding* of spirit [...]  
 so in everyday life  
 it is the plain facts and natural happenings  
 that conceal God and reveal him to us  
 little by little under the mind’s tooling. (My emphasis)

The final metaphor overturns ‘The mind’s tools had/ no power convincingly to put him together’ of ‘Perhaps’, thereby emphasizing again the discrepancy between an action in itself and the ways in which the action is often mistakenly deciphered. The metaphor of the ‘scaffolding’, although of course primarily denoting the role of the intellect in religious thought, is interesting in two further and interconnected senses. First, it may be reminiscent of Jacob’s dream of the ladder in Genesis 28, where Jacob, after experiencing his vision of the angels ascending and descending, *renames* the place where his dream occurred, Luz, as ‘Bethel’, meaning ‘house of God’. If this gloss is correct, then Thomas, we could argue, is again revealing the importance of ostensive definition in conceptual understanding. Secondly,

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<sup>114</sup> ‘Where do we go from here?’ *Selected Prose*, 121.



the image may also show that it is *God* who wishes to establish contact with creation. Therefore, God should not be depicted or imagined as ‘absent’ or even particularly distant; as Frye points out, the ladder (in actual fact, more of a staircase) was from Heaven *to* earth and not vice versa, so was essentially ‘an image of the divine will to reach man’.<sup>115</sup> To reinforce this interpretation, we can compare the poem with the following passage from *A Year in Ll^yn*:

But there are two sides to existence too, the transcendental and the subordinate, as it were. It is an abysmal rift that exists between those who seek to exalt life and those who want to reduce it to the “bare facts”, as they term them. “Life is nothing but...” they say. But this won’t do [...] Nothing but? Lift your head at night and look at the heavens with their “thousand peacock eyes”, to quote Saunders again. Nothing but? I saw the Northern Lights this month, the huge electric curtain that is to be seen from time to time in Wales, but which is one of the wonders of the far north [...] It is likely that Jacob was too far south to see it, and yet it isn’t unlike a huge ladder between earth and heaven, and “behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.”<sup>116</sup>

‘Plain’ or ‘bare’ facts both conceal *and* disclose God. In *actual* fact, unadorned ‘facticity’ is as much a metaphysical chimera as the supposition that God must somehow be ‘found’. ‘Semi-Detached’ (*F*, 42) contains a similar emphasis on perceptual/ ontological duality leading to emancipation, although, as is the case with many of the Aberdaron poems, self-repudiating irony occasions the imagistic gear-changes within the text:

I am given to slum

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<sup>115</sup> *Words with Power*, 151-2.

<sup>116</sup> *Autobiographies*, 131-2.

clearance; I have thrown my images  
 outside where they accumulate  
 in a huge pile. It is not true  
 I am the house of prayer [...]  
     If the best they can do  
 is to say I am the ghost  
 in the machine, I will lay  
 that ghost.

Although recognizing that deific metaphors and metonymies often misrepresent and bewilder, the opening stanza is obviously not a renunciation of imagery *per se* but a petition for figurative regeneration. The reference to the self as ‘a house of prayer’ is a quotation from Matthew 21:13 (cf. Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46), where Christ Himself combines a quotation from Isaiah 56:7 with one from Jeremiah 7:11 in order to reprimand the defilers of the temple: ‘ “It is written”, he said to them, “My house will be called a house of prayer”, but you have made it a “den of robbers.”’ The Gospel’s and Thomas’s revocation of the original conceit shows both the centrality of metaphorical depiction in thought, and also the way in which metaphor may obfuscate *and* clarify thinking. The same trope may expedite *and* encumber the intellect; perplexity is often a consequence of employing a term, or a set of terms, in a manner contrary to their original usage. The conceit of ‘the ghost/ in the machine’ advances further this idea, for this is an explicit reference to Gilbert Ryle’s famous critique of Cartesian dualism in *The Concept of Mind* (1949), where Ryle argues that intellectual confusion repeatedly arises from the making of ‘category mistakes’. A category mistake is defined by Ryle as that which occurs when one *uses* a term or a concept in an invalid or unsustainable way, and in so doing

unintentionally disfigures one's *initial* approach to an intellectual problem.<sup>117</sup> The poem's second stanza, re-varnishing the 'plain facts' image of 'Emerging', combines nationalist and ecological metaphors ('I live in a contemporary/ dwelling in a country that/ is being consumed. Nature regards/ me with a distrust that is/ well-founded') to emphasize again that 'facts' are in reality composite clusters of discordant experiences. The text concludes with another entreaty to relinquish the preordained, 'immobile' archetype:

I am  
neither down here, nor  
up there. I am where  
I am, a being with no  
view but out upon the uncertainties  
of the imperatives of science.<sup>118</sup>

Metaphor can therefore outmanoeuvre or 'trump' metaphor, yet one can never completely exempt oneself from metaphorical annexations of a subject. The 'bewitchment' of language may only be contested through, and with, additional metaphorical representations. Thought is '*semi-detached*' in the same way that language can only be attacked 'with its *own* tools' ('After Jericho', *F*, 43). The underlying dynamics of selfhood reject both Kantian

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<sup>117</sup> Thomas clearly had some knowledge of Ryle as *The Concept of Mind* is specifically mentioned in Ninian Smart's paper, 'The Concept of Heaven', in the *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures, 1967/8*, 234. Smart argues that impressions or models of heaven are dependent on the 'organic milieu' of mythic and doctrinal concepts preceding their preliminary formulation, so to properly understand the term 'heaven' we need to be *critically* aware of the archetypes which gave rise to the initial definition. Thomas seems to point out that this synthesis of conflictive archetypes and paradigms is at least one source of religious perplexity. Cf. the opening to 'The Small Country' (*F*, 19): 'Did I confuse the categories?/ Was I blind?/ Was I afraid of hubris/ in identifying this land/ with the kingdom? Those stories/ about the far journeys, when it was here/ at my door; the object/ of my contempt that became/ the toad with the jewel in its head!'

<sup>118</sup> The threefold repetition of the Tetragrammaton here suggests that the depiction may also refer to God and, if so, we could interpret the first four lines as another attempt by Thomas to establish that deity is external to both apophatic and cataphatic predication.

‘transcendence’ and Hegelian ‘dissolution’ (‘Synopsis’, *F*, 44, ll. 9-12) but repudiate *also* the analytical aridity of logical positivism (*ibid.*, l. 17).<sup>119</sup>

‘The White Tiger’ (*F*, 45) embraces a similar contention regarding the inherent ‘doubleness’ of thought’s predispositions or tendencies: ‘God breathes within the confines/ of our definitions of him’. Our theological nomenclature must of necessity be amorphous—we think again of Exodus 3: 14—yet it does not follow from this that ‘God-statements’ are semantically meaningless. ‘The Film of God’ (*F*, 47), returns to the coupled themes of silence as volubility and our failure to recognize that metaphysical ‘ambiguity’ does not entail theological privation:

Sound too? The recorder  
that picks up everything picked  
up nothing but the natural  
background. What language  
does the god speak? [...]

And a shadow,  
as we watched, fell, as though  
of an unseen writer bending over  
his work.

It was not cloud,  
because it was not cold,  
and dark only from the candlepower

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<sup>119</sup> Again a Wittgensteinian gloss is useful, for Wittgenstein’s entire later career was a prolonged argument against the logical positivism he essentially founded in the *Tractatus*. Language, the later Wittgenstein came to believe, does not possess a ‘logical’ structure at all but must instead be approached through awareness of the different circumstances or contexts in which it is used, hence his famous conceptualization of the ‘language-game’. It can certainly be argued that Thomas’s emphasis on dissimilar or dialectically incompatible theological ‘language-games’, forms the thematic substructure to many of his religious poems.

behind it. And we waited  
 for it to move, silently  
 as the spool turned, waited  
 for the figure that cast it  
 to come into view for us to  
 identify it, and it  
 didn't and we are still waiting.

The closing lines adroitly repeal the Platonic metaphor of the cave. Instead of schooling ourselves to witness the truth, as Plato recommends, we narcissistically declare instead that culpability for intellectual confusion must be located elsewhere: whatever skulks beyond the cave's entrance should divulge itself to those inside and not the other way around. We attempt to convince ourselves that it is neither our imagination nor our intellect which is at fault but something external to both.<sup>120</sup> In contradistinction, says Thomas, it is not the 'dialect' of God but *our* linguistic-theological resourcefulness which must be revolutionized: 'I modernize the anachronism// of my language' ('The Absence', *F*, 48). For such reconstruction to be effective, however, we must appreciate that our religious language, and therefore our thinking, will involve reciprocally interpenetrative abortive and efficacious description. 'Balance' (*F*, 49), one of the best-known 'Kierkegaardian' poems from the Eglwys Hywyn Sant period, contains a similar focus on denotative ambivalence to create its effects:

No piracy, but there is a plank

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<sup>120</sup> Plato of course distrusted imagination (*phantasia*) in itself as a purveyor of truth. Nevertheless, it is important to note that his whole argument against *mimesis* in the *Republic*—the 'old quarrel between philosophy and poetry', 607b—turns on the idea that 'truthful' art is duty-bound to move us away from pure emotion and into ethical and metaphysical judgement. In many of his religious poems, Thomas seems to be drawing a comparable distinction between unadulterated (or 'mystical') emotion and the precepts of reason; therefore, the poet appears to be disclosing how the misleading power of the former may deleteriously affect the latter.

to walk over seventy thousand fathoms,  
 as Kierkegaard would say, and far out  
 from the land. I have abandoned  
 my theories, the earlier certainties  
 of belief [...]

Is there a place  
 here for the spirit? Is there time  
 on this brief platform for anything  
 other than the mind's failure to explain itself?<sup>121</sup>

Ingenuous confidence in doctrine, creed or dogma, has been supplanted by perplexity or mystification. The Kierkegaardian-like 'leap' into the brisk final stanza, however, provides ironic revocation of the poem's earlier conceits—the mind *has* explained itself for the poem displays to us the cadences of religious bewilderment and is therefore a forceful imaginative statement of a specific intellectual condition. Although the 'earlier certainties' have expired, there remains a 'platform' of skepticism—which is not to be confused with either doubt or disbelief—in regard to one-dimensional assertions of authenticity and representativeness; moreover, this platform of skepticism is one on which a revitalized religious epistemology may be constructed. The ontologically 'inactive' or the linguistically/ metaphysically hermetic must be replaced by a form of epistemological dynamism: 'uncertainties' themselves are the kingpins of theological discourse. In this sense, the poem's two concluding questions containing the basis of their own resolution. In religious as in secular thought, a failure may

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<sup>121</sup> The other poems in which Kierkegaard appears are 'Kierkegaard' (*P*, 18-9); 'A Grave Unvisited' (*NHBF*, 9); 'Synopsis' (*F*, 44); 'I' (*MHT*, 58); 'Fathoms' (*NTF*, 10); 'S.K.' (*NTF*, 15-17). Davis has examined the Kierkegaardian theme in all these poems in his 'R.S. Thomas and Søren Kierkegaard', in *R.S. Thomas: Poetry and Theology*, 124-42. See also Tony Brown's 'Over Seventy Thousand Fathoms: The Sea and Self-definition in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas', and M. W. Thomas's 'Irony in the Soul: The Religious Poetry of R. S. [ocrates] Thomas'.

still be designated a success if something new and significant is ascertained. Failure may then become a catalyst for emancipation, and thus may also stimulate revitalized intellectual and spiritual existence.<sup>122</sup>

The volume's final poem, 'Pilgrimages' (*F*, 51-2), draws together many of the previous texts' themes concerning the incessant interplay between complexity and simplicity, movement and inertia, interiority and exteriority. The title itself expresses much, for the use of the plural suggests both the different ways in which one may make a pilgrimage, and also that one's pilgrimage-making does not, in actual fact, ever truly cease. The opening stanza defines pilgrimage to the famous Bardsey Island by means of the paradoxical premise of arrival as commensurate with departure: 'Am I too late?/ Were they too late also, those/ first pilgrims?' Thomas also underscores our misguided conviction that pilgrimage is more a corporeal than a cerebral endeavour with the scornful anthropomorphism of 'a fast/ God, always before us and/ leaving as we arrive'. The compact second stanza, in an unexpected alteration from the preceding stanza's governing conceit although the vehicular foundation of the image remains unaltered, expresses the futility of scientific rather than religious hagiography: 'What they listen to is not/ hymns but the slow chemistry of the soil/ that turns saints' bones to dust'. The imagery accentuates once more the ways in which legitimate/ bogus perception either encourages, or detracts from, intellectual investigation. The third and final stanza, in a return to the opening stanza's emphasis on arrival and departure eliciting essentially identical processes, contrasts images of movement or agitation with those of composure or immobility:

These people are not

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<sup>122</sup> Davis, 132, suggests that the 'the blond/ hero' in the opening stanza may be a portrayal of Kierkegaard himself or a reference to the Christ of Warner Sallman's painting. It is also possible that Thomas may be thinking here of Siegfried in Wagner's reworking of the Norse myth, for the opera concludes with the hero finally learning the meaning of fear and therefore wisdom. This interpretation would connect with the poem's theme of exchanging naïve confidence for maturity and judgement.

late or soon; they are just  
 here with only the one question  
 to ask, which life answers  
 by being in them. It is I  
 who ask. Was the pilgrimage  
 I made to come to my own  
 self, to learn that in times  
 like these and for one like me  
 God will never be plain and  
 out there, but dark rather and  
 inexplicable, as though he were in here?

An impression of the poet's thought hastening into combat against *itself* is conveyed by the largely monosyllabic diction, knife-edge enjambements, and shifting pronouns, prepositions and adjectives. Thomas in this poem is juxtaposing contented 'hic et nunc' self-possession against intellectual despondency. However, it would be mistaken to suppose that the lines should merely be taken as indicative of envious comparison or anguished introspection. Given the 'instructional' thematic complexion of many of the preceding poems, it is entirely plausible that 'Pilgrimages' is a text more concerned with showing how the 'search' for interiority often contains a crippling *reductio ad absurdum* than one in which it is averred that the truths of selfhood, or divinity, must of necessity remain concealed. The concluding simile, for example, through a supple imagistic turnaround, locates deity *within* the self; the image explicitly attaches selfhood *to* Godhead and thus shows that for *either* to be located, there is, to cite *The Listener* piece again, 'no need to go anywhere'.<sup>123</sup> In fact, although the truths of interiority can

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<sup>123</sup> St. Cadfan's monastery on Bardsey Island was demolished by Henry VIII in 1537 and so a pilgrimage to the island is essentially an 'imaginative' event. It is not perhaps too whimsical to suggest that this absence of an *actual*



perhaps never be completely unearthed (an adaptation of the old phenomenological paradox of consciousness attempting to hunt down consciousness) one can still ‘learn’, as the poem states, correct investigative methods: by deciphering that which is false we have obviously gone some way toward releasing that which is true. Pilgrimages do not, in a certain sense, entail arrival or even the projection of termini; as the etymology of the word reveals, a pilgrim (*peregrinus*) is a ‘foreigner’, that is, one who travels ‘abroad’ (*peregre*), with the intention of ‘returning home’. Thus, the definitive reason for ‘going on’ pilgrimage is, like Eliot’s (re) interpretation of his starting place in the closing section of ‘Little Gidding’, actually homecoming or *re*-arrival. Thomas’s question, therefore, is in effect an acknowledgement of God and man’s fundamental interconnection as well as an acceptance that inquisitorial thinking reveals the essential truths of selfhood. *Legitimate* theological questioning—and it is surely appropriate that the final poem in the collection ends on such a questioning note—opens up the ‘reality’ of God in addition to providing an interpretative methodology with which the truths of God’s nature may be communicated. In a comparable sense to Thomas’s construal of Abercuawg, Bardsey Island symbolizes not a lofty objective or an exalted aspiration of thought, but a means by which *actual* human thinking—as opposed to idealized *projections* of thinking—may break through obstructive religious models and engage reality anew. As Thomas writes in *A Year in Ll^yn*, quoting from Siôn Cent’s mid-fifteenth century poem ‘*I’r Wyth Dial*’, ‘the truth is that poetry is not made from fine views, but from words and ideas and the condition of man. “*Ystad bard, astudio byd*”, “The poet’s business is to study the world”.’<sup>124</sup>

The Aberdaron collections, therefore, appear predominantly concerned with collapsing ‘inarticulacy’/ ‘articulacy’/ apophaticism/ cataphaticism binary oppositions. Through many of these poems Thomas shows that man’s speechlessness before God is the truest *expression* of

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monastery on the island compounds the general idea in the poem of imagination and imaginative questioning as lying at the heart of pilgrimage itself.

<sup>124</sup> *Autobiographies*, 148.

the human-divine relationship. Man does not stand mute before the ostensible 'incoherence' of the Exodic name, for man's very silence is that which *speaks* deific otherness. Prosopopoeia provides a rhetorical method by means of which Thomas can explore the illuminating paradoxes of voluble inarticulacy. Polyphonies of silence verbalize divinity in a way that no words can do, and prosopopoeia, because it *assumes* 'absence', is the trope most able to 'voice' the apparent 'voicelessness' of God. One is therefore able to 'speak' God without lapsing into crude and reductionist anthropomorphism, and the separation of God from 'God' paves the way for the comparable separation of onto-theology from theology proper, a project which, as chapters five and six will attempt to show, seems to form the thematic crux of Thomas's later religious poetry.

## Chapter Four

### **‘Move/ the paintings to one side’: Iconotextuality, Non-Envoicing, and Narrative Destabilization in *Between Here and Now* (1981) and *Ingrowing Thoughts* (1985)**

The representation of a representation, *ekphrasis* shows itself [...] as a theoretical act of self-reflexivity from an art form which discloses another art form. It is the non-natural sign of a natural sign within the conversation which aimed at ranking the arts according to the categories of the natural (painting, on account of its immediacy) and non-natural (poetry, on account of its convention and artificiality). The insertion or inclusion within the flux of the narration of a spatial object—shield, urn, painting—spatializes narrative, which is a temporal art, and blurs the sharp distinction made by Lessing between painting as a spatial art and narrative as a temporal art.<sup>1</sup>

We do well to remember the root meaning of ekphrasis: “speaking out” or “telling in full.” To recall this root meaning is to recognize that besides representational friction and the turning of fixed forms into narrative, ekphrasis entails prosopopoeia, or the rhetorical technique of envoicing a silent object. Ekphrasis speaks not only *about* works of art but also *to* and *for* them [...] Ekphrasis, then, is a literary mode that turns on the antagonism [...] between verbal and visual representation. Since this contest is fought on the field of language itself, it would be grossly unequal but for one thing: ekphrasis commonly reveals a profound ambivalence toward visual art, a fusion of

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<sup>1</sup> Liliane Louvel, *Poetics of the Iconotext*, ed. Karen Jacobs, trans. Laurence Petit (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 45-6.

iconophilia and iconophobia, of veneration and anxiety.<sup>2</sup>

In the poetry from *Between Here and Now* (1981) to *No Truce with the Furies* (1995), Thomas again and again combines the theme of silence as dialogically dynamic with the corresponding theme of theological perplexity as an inevitable consequence of merging ‘ontological’ and ‘linguistic’ hypotheses. Lest there should be an accusation at this point of warping the poetry in order to validate the thesis’s interpretative framework, it is important to stress that within poetry ‘trope-based’ understanding of the relationship between God and man originates from at least the mid-seventeenth century. One should also emphasize that, in a philosophical sense, the precise nature of both apophatic and cataphatic ‘God-talk’ may be traced, as was indicated in the previous chapter, to the dialectically-centred critiques of pseudo-Dionysius in the sixth century.<sup>3</sup> There is, one may argue, nothing *doctrinally* novel in Thomas’s theological views, although the *manner* in which he encounters and engages his various topics and themes is often highly innovative. In many of Thomas’s religious poems the focus is on metaphors and metaphorical reversals, analogies and equivalences, repeatedly attacking their own ‘denotative’ usefulness. A poetics which appears to undermine *itself* is a recurrent rhetorical and structural stratagem in many of the texts.

If apophasis is essentially ‘hyperbole’ as Derrida says, meaning a persistently *creative* modality of speech and thought, then one can argue that much of Thomas’s ‘retirement’ religious verse should be understood as creatively *celebrating* a ‘non-ontological’ God and not, as some critics maintain, as a gloomily ‘negative’ proclamation of deific absence. Indeed, as soon as one discerns that the *via negativa* can only be approached through awareness of its

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<sup>2</sup> James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: C. U. P., 1993), 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> For more on the argument that rhetoric or troping was customarily regarded as the ‘correct’ mode for deific communication from the early modern period onwards, see Ceri Sullivan, *The Rhetoric of the Conscience in Donne, Herbert and Vaughan* (Oxford: O. U. P., 2008), esp. 30-7.

propensity to ‘root by uprooting’,<sup>4</sup> it becomes apparent that Thomas’s religious poetry should really be located within the Aquinean tradition of troping and imagery leading to self-knowledge, and self-knowledge to both kerygma and truth.

Thomas’s two volumes of ekphrastic poetry, *Between Here and Now* (1981) and *Ingrowing Thoughts* (1985), are unique within the oeuvre.<sup>5</sup> Although Thomas throughout his career wrote ‘poems about paintings’—an inaccurate definition of ekphrastic verse although serviceable as an introduction to the topic—these two collections provide his only ‘sustained’ creative response to the spatial arts.<sup>6</sup> Quite why Thomas should have so completely embraced ekphrasis in the years after leaving Aberdaron is of course a matter for conjecture. Thomas’s first wife, Mildred (‘Elsi’) Eldridge, was a notable artist, and presumably she was influential in stimulating her husband’s interest in painting.<sup>7</sup> One could also maintain that the sense of liberation Thomas undoubtedly experienced upon retiring from his pastoral responsibilities after some forty years of service to the church, kindled an accompanying sense of himself as

<sup>4</sup> Derrida, ‘Sauf le nom’. 67. My emphasis.

<sup>5</sup> There is no consensus regarding the spelling of the term ‘ekphrasis’. In the interests of clarity I have followed Louvel and Heffernan. For a history of the word’s various usages, see Heffernan, 191, n.2. An excellent summary of *ekphrasis* in Greek and early modern thought (the latter specifically concerned with *ekphrasis* in Sidney and Spenser) can be found in Claire Preston, ‘Ekphrasis: painting in words’, in *Renaissance Figures of Speech*, ed. Sylvia Adamson, Gavin Alexander and Katrin Ethenhuber (Cambridge: C. U. P., 2007), 115-29.

<sup>6</sup> As Robert Rehder observes, the ekphrastic poems chosen for inclusion in *Collected Poems 1945-1990* are: ‘On a Portrait of Joseph Hone by Augustus John’ (*SF*, 35); Souillac: *Le Sacrifice d’Abraham*’ (*BT*, 43); ‘Nocturne by Ben Shahn’ (*H*, 32); ‘Woman Combing. Degas’ (*LS*, 15); ‘*The Annunciation* by Veneziano’, (*LS*, 25). ‘R. S. Thomas’s Poems about Paintings’, in *Renascence*, 83-101. Rehder makes the two rather peculiar statements that Thomas ‘in most cases stays close to the picture’ and later on that ‘Thomas does not like ambiguity or uncertainty’, 91-4. This seems inaccurate, as Thomas’ ekphrases are often driven by an acute sense of ambiguity *as* meaning, an idea which is further strengthened via the poet’s narrative divergences from the original paintings. It is important to note that in *Between Here and Now* Thomas largely ignores Germain Bazin’s biographical information. Thomas’s ekphrases not merely represent but *re-present* the work.

Further critical discussions on Thomas’s ekphrastic poetry can be found in James A. Davies, “Attempts to Evade: R. S. Thomas’s ‘Impressions,’” in *The Anglo-Welsh Review*, 79 (1985): 70-83 (reprinted in *Critical Writings on R. S. Thomas*, 128-44); ‘*Ingrowing Thoughts* by R. S. Thomas’, in *The Anglo-Welsh Review*, 81 (1985), 112-14; “Pessimism and Its Counters”: *Between Here and Now* and After’, in *Miraculous Simplicity*, 225-43; Helen Vendler, ‘R.S. Thomas and Painting’, in *The Page’s Drift*, 57-81; Dennis O’Driscoll, ‘R.S. Thomas and the Poetry of Painting’, in *Agenda: A Tribute to R. S. Thomas*, 38-48; chapters 11(‘The fast dripping brush’) and 12 (‘The brush’s piety’) in M. Wynn Thomas, *R. S. Thomas: Serial Obsessive* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2103), 263-320.

<sup>7</sup> According to Gwydion Thomas, the poet’s son, in the early 1960s the Thomas household would play a game which involved postcards depicting works of art. The postcards would be lined up on the mantelpiece, and each Thomas had to select a favourite and then justify their choice to the others. From this, we can see that Thomas was clearly interested in how artworks should be ‘read’. Gwydion Thomas, interview with Tony Brown, at Plas Glyn-y-Weddw, 30<sup>th</sup> March, 2013.

re-energized spiritual pilgrim. As a consequence of this, Thomas also perhaps became enthusiastic for hitherto unexplored forms of imaginative self-expression.<sup>8</sup>

The continued indebtedness to Wallace Stevens is perhaps another factor in Thomas's immersion within the ekphrastic mode. Stevens was deeply influenced by painting throughout his life and regularly referred to artworks in his poems, letters, essays and notebooks.<sup>9</sup> *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937), for example, is generally regarded as a commentary on Picasso's 'The Old Guitarist' (1903) and, in particular, the artist's assertion that painting ('une somme de destructions') exists to obliterate and then revitalize the perceptual faculty: 'Is this picture of Picasso's, this "horde/ of destructions," a picture of ourselves, // Now an image of society?' This idea of painting as concurrently destructive and constructive prefigures a similar contention by Stevens in his 1951 lecture 'Relations between Poetry and Painting'. The lecture was delivered at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and was later published in *The Necessary Angel*; given Thomas's immersion within Stevens, it is almost certain that he knew the text. Stevens argues that to some extent the spatial and the temporal arts are one and the same: 'Does not the saying of Picasso that a picture is a horde of destructions also say that a poem is a horde of destructions?'<sup>10</sup> In any event, it is apparent that *Between Here and Now* and

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<sup>8</sup> Tony Brown begins his fourth chapter by quoting from the poem beginning 'The pretences are done with' from *The Echoes Return Slow* (103), commenting that here 'there is an almost palpable sigh of relief at his [Thomas's] escape from the routines of regular church services'. *R. S. Thomas: Writers of Wales*, 90.

<sup>9</sup> There is also a parallel in the two poet's fondness for Abstract Expressionism, as Thomas evidently admired Franz Marc just as much as Stevens admired Paul Klee. According to Wil Rowlands, 'Franz Marc was one of R. S.'s favourite artists. He felt a close affinity with Marc and with his view of the world, and had a reproduction of one of his works up on the wall at his final home in Pentrefelin near Cricieth'. 'Wil Rowlands and R. S. Thomas: "AM I UNDER REGARD?": Wil Rowlands interviewed by Jason Walford Davies', in *The David Jones Journal*, 104.

<sup>10</sup> *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 161. This is not to say that Stevens believed in any *direct* analogical linkage between poetry and painting (such as that found in Williams Carlos Williams, for instance); merely that he evidently assumed *some* form of aesthetic correspondence—the 'literature of painting', as he terms it— between the two art forms. For an illuminating discussion on Stevens and the sister arts, see Bonnie Costello, 'Effects of an Analogy: Wallace Stevens and Painting', in *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*, ed. Albert Gelpi (Cambridge: C. U. P., 1985), 65-85. Although arguing that, 'Stevens' attraction to painting is based, in part, on his alienation from the very rhetoricity and discursiveness so dominant in his own poetry', Costello appends an important caveat: 'I must acknowledge that [Stevens] occasionally links painting and poetry as two different forms of rhetoric [...] In bringing together poetry and painting as he does, Stevens attempts to fuse the visible and the invisible in a most uncompromising fashion'. *Ibid.*, 70-9. I am not sure what Costello means by 'uncompromising' here, but her emphasis on spatial/temporal synthesis in Stevens's work could also clearly be applied to the poems of *Between Here and Now* and

*Ingrowing Thoughts* represent a significant change in both structural technique and literary method, and in this chapter I would like to examine both collections in some detail.

As the first epigraph to the beginning of this chapter makes clear, ekphrastic creative writing is not merely the literary representation of an ‘immobile’ work of visual or plastic art.<sup>11</sup> The postmodernist impulse to admit binaries, concede dualities and sanction mimetic correlations between visual and verbal media has largely overturned Lessing’s argument in *Laocoon*, the paradigmatic example of Neoclassical ekphrastic theoretical writing, that aesthetic partitioning must exist between the stasis of the visual medium on the one hand and the temporal motion of its literary representation on the other.<sup>12</sup> Similar to Rorty’s supposition of a ‘linguistic turn’ in postmodernist thought, contemporary ekphrastics assumes the pre-eminence of what W. J. T. Mitchell has called the ‘pictorial turn’— that is, the reciprocity and interpenetrability of visual and textual cultures.<sup>13</sup> The aesthetic hierarchy suggested by Plutarch

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*Ingrowing Thoughts*. Tony Brown in ‘“Blessings, Stevens”: R.S. Thomas and Wallace Stevens’, in *Echoes to the Amen*, 112-31 and William V. Davis in ‘Wallace Stevens and R.S. Thomas: Influence *sans* Anxiety’, in *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, 30:1 (Spring 2006), 86-97, have analysed Stevens’s influence on Thomas.

<sup>11</sup> Jean H. Hagstrum in his pioneering work, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago: C. U. P., 1958), reserves ‘ekphrasis’ for only those poems in which the represented art object, like Keats’s Grecian urn, ‘speak out’ to the reader. When objects are only described, as in the case of Homer’s shield of Achilles, Hagstrum calls the poem ‘iconic’. I propose to use the more general sense of the term, as to employ Hagstrum’s taxonomy would create needless interpretative difficulties with regard to the respective ‘iconicity’ or ‘iconotextuality’ of the text/ image under consideration

<sup>12</sup> For example: ‘Painting and poetry should be like two just and friendly neighbours, neither of whom indeed is allowed to take unseemly liberties in the heart of the other’s domain, but who exercise mutual forbearance on the borders, and effect a peaceful settlement for all the petty encroachments which circumstance may compel either to make in haste on the rights of the other’. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoon*, trans. Ellen Frothingham (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), 110. For a comprehensive analysis of Lessing on the protracted ‘battle’ between the temporal and spatial arts, see W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: C. U. P., 1986), Part Two, chapter 4. The idea of painting and poetry locked together in a kind of semiotic ‘mêlée’ was also embraced by Leonardo da Vinci (who called it a *paragone*): ‘If you, poet, describe the figure of some deities, the writing will not be held in the same veneration as the painted deity, because bows and various prayers will continually be made to the painting. To it will throng many generations from many provinces and from over the eastern seas, and they will demand help from the painting and not from what is written’. *Treatise on Painting*, trans. A. P. McMahon (Princeton: P. U. P., 1956), Vol. I: 22. Cited in W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: C. U. P., 1992), 332.

<sup>13</sup> Mitchell commences *Picture Theory* with a specific reference to Rorty and, surely correctly, traces the ‘linguistic turn’ in contemporary thought above all to Wittgenstein. The ‘pictorial turn’, says Mitchell, ‘is not a return to naïve mimesis, copy or correspondence theories of representation, or a renewed metaphysics of pictorial “presence”: it is rather postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality. It is the realization that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of *reading* (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that visual experience or “visual literacy” might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality.’ 16.

in a saying attributed by him to Simonides of Ceos, *pictura loquens, poesis tacens* ('painting is silent poetry; and poetry is painting with the gift of speech') and modified by Horace into the well-known dictum *ut pictura poesis*, has in recent years been supplanted by arguments positing the literal parallelism of the 'sister arts'. 'Iconotextual' effervescence, in these interpretations of word and image, displace the rigidity of Horatian stratification.<sup>14</sup> The 'iconotext', to borrow Liliane Louvel's extremely useful construal of Alain Montandon's original classificatory expression and a term I will employ throughout this chapter, is an artefact through and within which the hierarchical configuration of image and text is annulled by the literary artist's desire to blend two disparate objects into each other. By doing this, the writer is able to materialize a new and independent object of symbiotic tension.<sup>15</sup> The viewer/ reader of the ekphrastic text, or iconotext, is therefore, as Michael Benton contends, 'saturated with narratives of many kinds'.<sup>16</sup> The iconotext thus rises above the level of a mere amanuensis and instead explains itself, or 'speaks out', through the combined energy of its various modes of narrative rhetoric. Louvel, expanding Heffernan's definition of ekphrasis as more a *method* of thought than a literary genre, explains this central principle of ekphrastic writing excellently:

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<sup>14</sup> I have assumed the accuracy of this more or less established reading of the Horatian aphorism. It is important to note, however, Murray Krieger's convincing argument that Horace's 'dictum' is in fact nothing of the sort. According to Krieger, Horace merely meant that the audience-reader may respond in a similar fashion to both painting and poetry, and therefore the celebrated phrase should properly be understood as conveying an extremely broad-spectrum idea in regard to mimetic representation. See his *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign* (Baltimore: John Hopkins U. P., 1992), 78-80. Krieger is so adamant regarding this point that he refers to *Ars Poetica* as the *Epistle to the Pisos* in order to emphasize its non-dogmatic and unmethodical argumentative tone. Nevertheless, it is clearly the case that in *general* terms poetry is seen as the lesser of the two sister arts, a hierarchical classification I believe Thomas is, in part, endeavouring to invalidate in his two volumes of ekphrastic verse.

<sup>15</sup> 'Iconotexts' as defined by Montandon are those works originally conceived as homogenous by both painter and writer, for example the 'iconotexts' of Miro and Breton. Louvel decides to exclude such works from her investigation, concentrating instead on instances, mainly in prose, when the image generates the text or when the image's insertion into the text disturbs the latter's narrative flow. She does, however, 'retain the term "iconotext" since it illustrates perfectly the attempt to merge text and image in a pluriform fusion, as in an oxymoron. The word "iconotext" conveys the desire to bring together two irreducible objects and form a new object in a fruitful tension in which each object maintains its specificity. It is therefore a perfect word to designate the ambiguous, aporetic, and in-between object of our analysis'. *Poetics of the Iconotext*, 15. Mitchell uses the term 'imagetext' to designate the 'composite, synthetic works (or concepts) that combine image and text.' *Picture Theory*, 89 n. 9. Foucault, commenting on Magritte's famous depiction of the pipe, terms the compound of word and image a 'calligram'. Michel Foucault, *This Is Not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness (Berkeley: California U. P., 1982), 20-21. Cited in Mitchell, 70.

<sup>16</sup> 'Anyone for Ekphrasis?', in *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (October 1997) 369.



To represent works of art through language is to proceed to an operation of over-coding, i.e. to present a second time the sensible world which was already represented, i.e. Plato's appearances of appearances. The artistic image within the text takes on an epistemic or heuristic value. It is always "already there," "preconstructed," as the linguistics say. It thus appears as a place where meaning is increased, a place of aesthetic over-saturation.<sup>17</sup>

In Thomas's ekphrastic verse there is a comparable awareness of, and emphasis upon, processes of diffusion *and* concentration of meaning. Thomas's ekphrastic poems are 'anti-pictorialist' and 'non-mimetic' in that their controlling rhetorical trope is not *enargeia*—the capacity to describe something with such vividness that it is 'reproduced', a trope which Plato assumed was the artistic objective of the ekphrastic writer—but what we could term, following and then modifying Heffernan's designation, 'prosopopoeial non-voicing'. Although the texts 'speak' the accompanying works of art, they also repeatedly confound their assumed status as verbal analogues. As the previous chapter attempted to show, Thomas often appears to use *prosopopoeia* in this doubled or even multiplied sense. For instance, when Thomas stresses the inaccuracy of certain religious paradigms—and therefore stresses also the erroneous usages of words and definitions—he is foregrounding the ways in which our *initial* approaches to theological problems are often the wellsprings of our subsequent confusion. We unconsciously 'mask' truth by employing a 'voice' (a discursive or analytical paradigm) which does not articulate but disarticulate that which is true.<sup>18</sup> In particular, I will contend that these

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<sup>17</sup> *Poetics of the Iconotext*, 48

<sup>18</sup> Gavin Alexander remarks that *prosopopoeia* is a complicated rhetorical figure and not merely another name for personification. The Renaissance rhetoric books defined it approximately, classifying it as a figure of *thought* rather than a straightforward rhetorical device, with the Latin names for it including *formatio, fictio personae* and *sermocinatio*. A *prosopopoeia* could refer, for example, to an entire speech ghost-written for someone else or be employed in a more prescribed figurative sense, such as when an orator imagines what an absent person would

poems often turn on an understanding of narrative as potentially conflictual and, as a thematic supplement to this, demonstrate the provocative interplay between categorical and subjective experience. Thus, the iconotexts ultimately express the simultaneous de- and re-territorializing of a subject. The poems, I will argue, are antagonistic *and* symbiotic—and in this sense their overall dialectic is similar to Thomas’s earlier fusion of apophatic and cataphatic predication—with displacement and concurrent reinstatement of the works of art they ostensibly describe or salute their most discernible characteristic: ‘Because it verbally represents visual art, ekphrasis stages a contest between rival modes of representation: between the driving force of the narrating word and the stubborn resistance of the fixed image’.<sup>19</sup> I will further maintain that in his two collections of ekphrastic verse, Thomas’s depictions of this representational doubleness is also suggestive of the conflict between competing dialectics of reading, viewing, and interpreting. Consequently, the poems are concerned with the nature of the representative act itself: they illuminate the *underlying* dynamics of depiction or portrayal. It is in this manner that Thomas’s ekphrastic verse, I believe, is a thematic continuation of his earlier interests regarding perception, semiosis, and taxonomy. Moreover, because ekphrasis is traditionally prosopopoeial in that it aspires to give the work of art a ‘voice’—‘ekphrasis’ as derived from *ek* (‘out’) and *phrazein* (‘tell’, ‘declare’, ‘pronounce’), as Heffernan observes—Thomas’s absorption with the genre may be explained as a further attempt to understand what the language of silence, or speechlessness, is actually *saying*.<sup>20</sup>

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say. Literally, ‘prosopopoeia’ means ‘making a mask’ (from the Greek *prosopōn*, ‘face’ or ‘mask’), thus is a rhetorical strategy intended to both articulate *and* conceal a voice: ‘Prosopopoeia allows its users to adopt the voices of others; but it also has the potential to show them that when they think they are speaking in their own person, they are prosopopoeias themselves’. ‘Prosopopoeia: the speaking figure’, in *Renaissance Figures of Speech*, 107.

<sup>19</sup>*Museum of Words*, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Elaine Shepherd devises a comparable general strategy, although limits her discussion of the ekphrastic poems to those depicting women: ‘It is not difficult to see why these poems on paintings are of particular value to our understanding of Thomas’s approach to the image, focusing as they do on a single subject—woman—and making multiple readings of that subject. We will find that many of the problems of reading—or of speaking—woman are also problems when it comes to “reading” or “speaking” God. An examination of the various strategies which Thomas adopts in reading images of woman may be expected to alert us to the means he adopts in reading images of God’. *R. S. Thomas: Conceding an Absence*, 13. Shepherd, however, repeatedly assumes that the pictures have a ‘stable’ or even ‘transcendent’ reality and are therefore independent of the viewer himself; for example:

To begin with, we must obviously reflect upon the title given by Thomas to his first collection of ekphrastic verse. ‘Between Here and Now’ conveys that the volume will somehow propose departure from the existentially affirmative subtexts of the *hic et nunc*; that the poet will, in one way or another, substitute self-confidence or assurance with fragmentation or division. However, Thomas’ titles (of collections and individual poems) often obscure just as much as they disclose, and here too we would be prudent to consider the various inferences engendered by the slippery preposition.<sup>21</sup> ‘Between’, for instance, may be understood as indicating separation—we are between the spatial (‘here’) and the temporal (‘now’)<sup>22</sup>—or it may imply a frustration of desire—*hic et nunc* also serving as a motto for satisfaction—or it may function as a kind of ‘doubled’ or Janus-like predicative ‘operator’, simultaneously suggesting dislocation *and* attachment: we are fastened *within* the *hic et nunc* yet are also ‘between’, or *exterior to*, its proposed existential certitudes. The *hic et nunc* of the title seems to collapse, in an epistemological sense, into the *hic et ubique*—we are here, there, and everywhere simultaneously—and it is this sort of conceptual complexity that generates the iconotextual tensions discernible throughout the volume.

The structure of the book itself gives prominence to an embedded destabilization of visual and verbal tropes. The first painting we see is a colour reproduction of Degas’s ‘Women Ironing’, which is duplicated in monochrome on page 52, with the accompanying poem facing

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‘Thomas’s attempt to escape the implications of the female body is echoed by [the Renoir scholar] William Gaunt, who remarks: “We cease to think of the real world; we enter the world of Renoir’s mind, the ultimate vision of timeless beauty’. Ibid., 33. Shepherd views the poems as *commentaries* on the pictures rather than as iconotexts, thus she overlooks the mimetic self-reflexivity which defines ekphrastic creative writing.

<sup>21</sup> To use two obvious examples, ‘pietá’, as was noted in the previous chapter, signifies both ‘pity’ *and* ‘piety’. Also, the various denotations of ‘frequencies’, as William V. Davis points out, presage the ‘waves of metaphoric meaning so frequently at work in these [*Frequencies*] poems’. ‘Gaps in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas,’ 86.

<sup>22</sup> Vendler makes a similar point, writing that the title represents a complication of Keats’s division (in the odes to the nightingale and the urn) between arts’ spatial and temporal qualities. ‘R. S. Thomas and Painting’, 57. See also Shepherd, *R. S. Thomas: Conceding an Absence*, 11: ‘The *Here* and *Now* of the main title corresponds to the ‘space’ and ‘time’ of the quotation [Shepherd is referring to J. D. McClatchy on Pound’s definition of an image as ‘that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time’], but the title also juxtaposes two contrasted modes of apprehending and defining reality, and asserts that we operate between these two contrasts’.

it on the right hand page.<sup>23</sup> In this instance, the ekphrastic ‘visual-textual contract’ as Susan Harrow calls it, stimulates the reader-viewer to at least five overlapping, yet at the same moment self-enclosed, narrative extrapolations.<sup>24</sup> Degas observes/ arranges the scene and reproduces it in colour. The reproduction is reproduced in monochrome. Thomas ‘comments’ on the (re)reproduction. The reader of the poem responds to Thomas’s (re)re-reproduction.<sup>25</sup> In addition, painting *itself* is entirely dependent upon narrative conventions in order to generate its effects, for as soon as one looks at a painting one cannot help *but* narrativize it. *Every* painting acts as a visual inducement for the generation of discourse.<sup>26</sup> In a purely formal

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<sup>23</sup> This reverses Bazin who has his colour plates on the right. Thomas probably positions the pictures on the left because we read from left to right and so by positioning the poem ‘after’ the picture, the infusion of new meaning into the latter is more pronounced. As Bazin’s foremost authorial intention is to provide a straightforward historical contextualisation of the picture, his positioning of text on left and painting on right, means that the former leads easily into the latter without much in the way of narrative displacement. In *Ingrowing Thoughts* Thomas alternates between right and left hand positionings of painting and poem. It is certainly arguable that this later arrangement of text and image shows the poet’s desire to accentuate again the innate complexity of the perceptual act. In connection with this, it is perhaps worth making the obvious but often overlooked point that paintings cannot be anything other than linguistically ‘framed’. This is a principal contention, for example, in Heffernan’s thesis: ‘The ekphrastic poetry of our time [...] represents individual works of art within the context of the museum, which of course includes the words that surround the pictures we see, beginning with picture titles. Without a title, could Auden or anyone else know that the splashing legs in Breughel’s painting belong to Icarus, or even to a drowning man? Picture titles are merely the first of the words we encounter along with the pictures we see in museums. From titles we move to the curatorial notes on the museum wall, to catalogue entries, to exhibition reviews, to the explanatory notes that invariably accompany reproductions, and to the pages of art history synecdochically, the museum signifies all the institutions that select, circulate, reproduce, display, and explain works of visual art, all the institutions that inform and regulate our experience—largely by putting it into words’. *Museum of Words*, 139. Similarly, much of the terminology of literary analysis—for example ‘structure’, ‘foregrounding’, ‘point of view’, as well as narrative ‘framing’ itself, of course—is clearly redolent of the spatial arts, thus demonstrating again the essential artificiality of Lessing’s division.

<sup>24</sup> ‘New Ekphrastic Poetics’, in *French Studies*, vol. LXIV, no. 3, (2010) 255-264. Quotation from 257. Harrow draws attention to the conceptual pliancy required to properly ‘read’ the ekphrastic text/ iconotext: ‘ekphrasis is not one process but two (at least): the writer’s translation from the perceptual (visualized) or remembered world into the verbal medium prompts the work of the reader, who must “re-translate” and turn the original act or perceiving (and its transformation) into an *imagined* act of perceiving [...] By so often occluding or transforming its referent, modern ekphrasis slips free of “painting-in-words”; by erasing the signifying premises of traditional ekphrasis, writerly texts embrace the impossibility of wording the image *qua* image and reveal the creative potential to which that felicitous *impasse* gives rise’. *Ibid.*, 263-4.

<sup>25</sup> Heffernan’s definition of ekphrasis as ‘the verbal representation of visual representation’ is apposite. *Museum of Words*, 3. Ekphrastic writing is a mimesis of mimesis, thus can be distinguished both from pictorialism—which generates in language effects similar to those created by pictures—and the type of iconicity found in concrete verse.

<sup>26</sup> This is obvious with regard explicitly narrativized iconotexts, such as Auden’s response in ‘Musee des Beaux Arts’ to Breughel’s depiction of the Icarus legend. (Incidentally, Auden’s text is perhaps the first fully-developed twentieth century ekphrastic poem as well as the first, alongside Yeats’s ‘The Municipal Gallery Revisited’, to be named after a specific museum or gallery.) As Mitchell points out, however, even the most ‘abstract’ of pictures—Mitchell uses what is probably the most famous abstract painting ever produced, Malevich’s ‘Red Square and Black Square’ as the basis for his discussion—irresistibly compels the narrative impulse. See *Picture Theory*, 223-6. In addition, the earliest known example of ekphrasis in western literature (as every commentator on the ekphrastic mode remarks) is the lengthy description of the shield that Hephaestus makes for Achilles in the

reading, the ‘mimesis’ within this particular iconotext is at last quintuple; more so, indeed, if we bring in the obvious points that Degas chose to select this scene from a range of possible others thus decided to (re)present this particular narrative, and also that Thomas’s ‘response’ to the painting is the formation of an independent narrative. Therefore, the architectonic of the text and image portrayed is in reality a complex sequence of outflanking narrative paradigms. Resemblance, or, as the semioticians would say, ‘iconicity’, is replaced by cognitive pluralism. Narratives and counternarratives elide the boundaries between presentation, reproduction and representation. Thomas immediately challenges the single master-code of mimesis embraced by Plato, Leonardo and Lessing with their emphatic denial of ‘slippage’ between painting’s solicitation of resistance and textuality’s rhetorical coercion. The tricky sequence of depictions stimulated by Degas’s canvas show the inextricable weaving together of representation and discourse, visual and verbal experience, and thus the impossibility of achieving ‘perfect’ correlation between word and image:

The image/ text is not a template to reduce these things to the same form, but a lever to pry them open. It might be best described, not as a concept, but as a theoretical *figure* rather like Derrida’s *différance*, a site of dialectical tension, slippage and transformation.<sup>27</sup>

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eighteenth book of the *Illiad* (ll. 478-608). It is also worth quoting Heffernan on the *Purgatorio*, canto 10: ‘Dante dramatically heightens the ekphrastic techniques [...] of his ancient predecessors: prosopopoeia, representational friction, and narrative. While Homer and Theocritus refer to speeches represented by visual art but never quote them, Dante tells us exactly what the sculpted figures say. Secondly, by showing how a silent art generates audible meaning, he sharpens the friction between the visible image and the spoken words it signifies, between the graphic medium and its quite literal message. Finally, he uses spoken words to construct or evoke a series of complete dramatic narratives concluding with the “story” (“istoria” [71] ) of Trajan that is “storied” (“storiata” [73] ) in marble— a redundancy clearly calculated to underline the narrative force of the sculptures’. *Museum of Words*, 40. Narrative, in other words, cannot be circumvented when observing pictorial/ verbal representation. The discordancy between *competing* narratives is precisely that which furnishes the iconotext with its representative dynamism.

<sup>27</sup> *Picture Theory*, 106. Mitchell, commenting on Craig Owen’s metaphor of postmodern artistic movements such as installations, intermedia experiments, the New Imagism and so forth representing ‘an eruption of language into the field of the visual arts’ (‘Earthwords’, in *October*, no. 10 (Autumn, 1979), 126-7), says that the expression, ‘captures rather melodramatically the sense that postmodernism is an explosive breaking down of that barrier between vision and language that had been vigorously maintained by modernism’. *Ibid.*, 217. Mitchell also refers

The breaking up of canonical master-narratives and master-tropes is clearly evident in the volume's first iconotext, 'Monet: Lady with a Parasol' (*BHN*, 13). Vendler's gender-constructed reading of the poem seems rather forced; she argues, for example, that here Thomas is conveying to us 'what he wants women to be [...] creatures of honest and solid naturalness, natives of a Hardy-esque pastoral'.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, Vendler's twin exegetical tactics of accentuating the implied interrogatives at the end of each line and an interpretation of the stanzaic structure as the abrogation of 'self-contained units', is helpful in revealing the poem's leitmotif of referential and epistemic intricacy:

Thomas, by "pulling" each lyric state up into the orbit of its predecessor, tells us that lyric states are not separate moments of perception, query, answer, reason, criticism, and reassurance, but rather a seamless flow of responses. The modernist 'stream of consciousness' has here found a lyric equivalent, in part imitating the global response one must have to a non-temporal object like a painting.<sup>29</sup>

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to Michael Fried's account of abstract painting as the 'theatrical' blurring of visual/ verbal distinctions. Fried means by this that much of postmodern art purposefully synthesizes spatial and temporal codes so that art becomes 'performative' and consciously 'directed' towards a beholder. See Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', in *Artforum* (June, 1967), reprinted in *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology*, ed. George Dickie and Richard Sclafani (New York: St. Martin's, 1977), 438-60. Cited in Mitchell, 216. It is impossible to grasp Thomas' ekphrases as a genre unless one is at least tangentially aware of this inextricable *commingling* of visual and textual media.

<sup>28</sup> 'R. S. Thomas and Painting', 64.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 68. James A. Davies's analysis of the structure is similar to Vendler's: '[ 'Lady with a Parasol' ] consists of four stanzas each of four irregular lines. Each stanza is linked to the next through the continuation of a sentence that begins the preceding stanza [...] The poem's argument proceeds from sentence to sentence and not from stanza to stanza. The stress on the sentence thus generates tension between it and the stanza, or, to put it another way, between the irregular entity and the formal unit. The former impels the poem towards fragmentation—the poem breaking-up into a series of sentences—the latter struggles to impose order through stanzaic form'. 'Attempts to Evade: R. S. Thomas's "Impressions"', 133. Commenting on 'Degas: Women Ironing', Vendler says that 'Thomas redefines aesthetic 'sin' here; temptation for the artist does not lead toward the usual vices but to the subtler but no less destructive sin of perceptual and moral indifference'. Vendler means that with this iconotext (although she does not use the term), the painter/ poet is attempting to foreground the necessity of looking at proletarian working women with as much concentration of purpose as he would observe 'aristocrats'. *Ibid.*, 75. This appeal to perceptual re-evaluation is of course correct—Vendler begins her discussion by proposing that 'perception, evaluation [...] and interpretation [...] happen synchronically rather than successively' (73)—although Vendler's rather trenchant use of the feminist paradigm seems to eclipse other equally interesting

This is certainly true of both poem and painting. The field of flowers in the foreground is contrasted with the sky's flawlessness in the background with the figure, slightly to the left of the visual field, functioning as a kind of perspectival 'pivot'. Thomas emphasizes the flexibility required to accurately observe a scene through the construction of conflictive lexical chains: 'sun'/ 'shadow'; 'head'/ 'feet'; 'shield'/ 'missiles'; 'serious'/ 'pretence'. In addition to this obvious verbal dynamic there is a strong sense of narrative fracturing or causal disturbance. The unforgiving depictions of the lady's gentrified pretensions in the first two quatrains are reinforced by the contemptuousness in ll. 8-10, 'What// she carries is a pretence/ at effeminacy' and its subsequent retraction through the wistful pastoralism of the poem's concluding metaphor. In Thomas's representation of Monet's presentation—in his construction, in other words, of a narrative enclosing or 'framing' the picture—the lady has purposefully substituted rustic simplicity for tawdry 'fashion' (a clear metonymy in this context for industrialization) and reductive narcissism. For all that, however, she will eventually return to the life of countrified unpretentiousness suggested in the final quatrain by the reiteration of bucolic imagery.<sup>30</sup>

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interpretations of this iconotext. Parenthetically, although Thomas is undeniably a 'lyric' as opposed to a 'narrative' poet, the primary feature of the iconotext as a site (or sight) of verbal/ visual transposition, obviously challenges our desire for *simplistic* generic classification. As Thomas writes in 'Taste' (*LS*, 35), the critics are often in a 'compulsive hurry// to place a poet'.

<sup>30</sup> James A. Davies's reading of the poem's conclusion is quite different. According to Davies, the lady is nothing more than 'a number of bodily parts, a source of physical comfort for a "peasant" whose mind is elsewhere. The narrator is neither compassionate nor involved but cold, austere, cynical'. 'Attempts to Evade: R. S. Thomas's "Impressions"', 134. Davies's entire paper, in fact, turns on the supposition that the poems, 'speak bleakly of a decadent world. Their references to sexual need, to submerged sexuality, are developed [...] into a powerful portrayal of the potentially anarchic sexual force, the surging impulse towards chaos, that lie close to the seemingly urbane and peaceful surfaces of a fallen world. The narrator's futile evasions demonstrate that, for him, it is impossible to escape the innate fleshly instinct'. *Ibid.*, 144. One does not wish to overemphasize critical divergences, but this interpretation seems flatly wrong. Notwithstanding those poems in which man's 'swinishness' ('Degas: Musicians in the Orchestra', *BHN*, 27) is clearly counterbalanced by an appeal to pathos and sensitivity ('Degas: Portrait of a Young Woman', *BHN*, 21; 'Cézanne: Dr Gachet's House', *BHN*, 35; 'Cassat: Young Woman Sewing', *BHN*, 55; 'Gauguin: La Belle Angèle', *BHN*, 61), it is essential to view the texts and paintings not as 'caught moments', as Davies says (130), but as continually evolving fusions of spatial and temporal representation. A painting, by definition, *cannot* be a 'caught moment', for the very instant one lays eyes on it one *must* begin to contextualize and therefore narrativize whatever is depicted. The act of viewing cannot dispense with the presuppositions—historical, aesthetic, intellectual and so on—brought *to* the picture by the viewer. Davies appears to believe that one is able to view in a kind of aesthetic vacuum; that one can, as it were,

This brief discussion of the opening poem shows that the mimetic representation of mimesis itself, or the ‘mirroring of a mirroring’ as John Hollander calls it in a clear echo of Heffernan’s ‘verbal representation of visual representation’, is essential to an understanding of ekphrasis’s narratological rhetoric.<sup>31</sup> To extend Hollander’s analogical definition, the iconotext is a verbal and structural hall of mirrors with the pictorial and literary constituents of the composition merging and separating, reflecting and concurrently deflecting, the viewer-reader’s gaze. As Krieger says, the ekphrastic compulsion in *both* poet and reader involves,

two opposed impulses, two opposed feelings about language: one is exhilarated by the notion of ekphrasis and one is exasperated by it. Ekphrasis arises out of the first, which craves the spatial fix, while the second yearns for the freedom of the temporal flow. The first asks language—in spite of its arbitrary character and its temporality—to freeze itself into a spatial form. Yet it retains an awareness of the incapacity of words to come together at an instant (*tout a` coup*), at a single stroke of sensuous immediacy, as if in an unmediated impact. Their *incapacity* is precisely what is to be emphasized: words cannot have capacity, cannot be capacious, because they have, literally, no space. The exhilaration, then, derives from the dream—and the pursuit—of a language that can, in spite of its limits, recover the immediacy of a sightless vision built into

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deposit one’s baggage of presuppositions (one’s personality, in other words) at the museum’s entrance and gaze with unencumbered exactitude at what adorns the walls. Cf. Mitchell: ‘What does it mean to “apprehend a painting”? Or perhaps we should ask the question another way: what can the blind know of painting? For someone like Milton, who stocked his memory with the masterpieces of Renaissance art before going blind. the answer is, a great deal [...] it is entirely conceivable that an intelligent, inquisitive blind observer who knew what questions to ask could “see” a great deal more in a painting than the clearest-sighted dullard [...] there are so many substitutes, so many supplements, crutches, and mediations. And there are never more of them than when we claim to be having “the sheer experience of seeing the unique particularity of an object.” This sort of “pure” visual perception, freed from concerns with function, use, and labels, is perhaps the most highly sophisticated sort of seeing that we do; it is not the “natural” thing that the eye does (whatever that would be). The “innocent eye” is a metaphor for a highly experienced and cultivated sort of vision [...] The capacity for a purely physical vision that is supposed to be forever inaccessible to the blind turns out to be itself a kind of blindness’. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: C. U. P., 1987), 117-8.

<sup>31</sup> John Hollander, *The Gazer’s Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art* (Chicago: C. U. P., 1995), 7.



out habit of perceptual desire since Plato. It is the romantic quest to realize the nostalgic dream of an original, pre-fallen language of corporeal presence, though our only means to reach it is the fallen language around us. And it would be the function of the ekphrastic poet to work the magical transformation.<sup>32</sup>

In this reading, *all* art is a mnemonic device meant to reproduce an absent reality and although Krieger's 'transcendental' critique may appear slightly laboured, his emphasis on the entrenched prolixity of ekphrastic representation provides an accurate précis of the iconotext's in-built aesthetic versatility. Within the nexus of the iconotext, *ut pictura poesis* has important additional overtones of *ut poesis picture*. Representation is not so much mimetic as kinetic, with text and image *unavoidably* foregrounding their own performativity and, by extension, the visuality of text itself and the writerliness of the visual object.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, Thomas' ekphrastic poems supplant or elide their visual accompaniments; they demonstrate the falsity of the Simonidean assumption that visual art must be silent or even dumb, thus violate the presumed boundary between written and pictorial forms.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*, 10. James A. W. Heffernan has convincingly argued that the idea of a painting's ability to capture and perpetuate a moment, to raise it above time and contingency, is one we inherit from the Romantic period and especially from Wordsworth: 'Thou, with ambition modest yet sublime,/ here, for the sight of mortal man, hast given/ To one brief moment caught from fleeting time/ The appropriate calm of blest eternity'. 'Upon the Sight of a Beautiful Picture, Painted by Sir G. H. Beaumont'. See *Museum of Words*, 91-3. It is also interesting to compare Krieger's account of Romantic ekphrasis with Heffernan's: 'The great paradox of romantic ekphrasis [...] is that it simultaneously constructs and deconstructs the concept of visual art as a medium of transcendence [...] In romantic poetry [...] the iconophilic impulse to revere the timeless beauty or sublimity of the icon is checked by all that words can do to undermine its authority, to reveal its material impermanence, or to expose its petrifying impact on the narratable flow of life'. *Ibid.*, 133-4. Given that much Romantic literature weaves together the complicated relationships between impressions, ideas, memories and emotions, Heffernan's understanding of ekphrasis as a form of *interplay* between 'iconophilia' and 'iconophobia'—a dialectic which could also be applied to Thomas's ekphrases/ iconotexts—would appear closer to the mark than Krieger's 'meta-linguistic' appraisal of the same genre.

<sup>33</sup> Of course, writing as *writing* is visual and many authors have made extensive use of graphism in order to generate their effects. Sterne, for example, uses the dash in a pictorial way, and Woolf and Conrad often stress the visuality of ellipses. Although graphism is not iconotextual as such, one could easily argue that the use made of such punctuation marks by these authors is another *type* of blending together of words and the 'pictorial'.

<sup>34</sup> The supposedly hierarchical relationship between the spatial and the temporal is of course overturned further when the visual artist 'responds' to textuality. See Terry Duffy's 'response' to Thomas 'the person, the poet, the artist', with his 'R. S. Thomas Triptych', and Wil Rowlands' 'responses' to 'The Empty Church' from *Frequencies* and 'At The End' from *No Truce With the Furies*. 'The R. S. Thomas Triptych: In search of R. S. Thomas', in *The David Jones Journal*, 91-2, and 'Wil Rowlands and R. S. Thomas, "AM I UNDER REGARD?"',

We witness such dialectical reversals and exchanges throughout *Between Here and Now*. The second poem ‘Jongkind: The Beach at Sainte-Adresse’ (*BHN*, 15), for example, explicitly transforms the static tranquillity of the image into that which suggests ominous presentiment:

However skilfully  
 the blue surface mirrors  
  
 the sky, to the boat it is  
  
 the glass lid of a coffin  
  
 within which by cold lips  
  
 the wooden carcasses are mumbled.

With this iconotext, the displacement of the supposedly ‘engendering’ picture is clearly evident. Jongkind’s depiction is deconstructed then reconstructed by the poet into a

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ibid., 105-7. The Rowlands interview is especially interesting, as Rowlands adds ‘non-textual’ details to his ‘At The End’ picture (a second cross, a red tie, a spectre-like figure kneeling beside the bed) in order to provide an explicitly narrativized context for the work: ‘It’s a strong and purposeful addition [the red tie], intended as an expression of what I saw as R. S.’s flamboyance as a man [...] there was always a flamboyance about his personal appearance—his long hair, his long coats, his red braces and what became his trademark [...] that red tie [...] I saw him entering a room and changing the atmosphere completely by his mere presence’. Rowlands also says that in his mind the chair in the picture recalls the chair painted by van Gogh at Arles, thus opening up another narrativized context for the viewer. Ibid., 106-7. With regard to Thomas’s interpretation of plastic art, William V. Davis remarks apropos ‘Souillac: *Le Sacrifice d’Abraham*’ that, as the piece of sculpture in the Abbey Church of Sainte Marie ‘adds to’ the Genesis source-text, so Thomas ‘adds to’ the sculpture. In particular, says Davies, Thomas’s use of anaphora suggests the formation of open-ended narrativized subtexts: ‘Six of the sentences in the Biblical text begin with an “And” and there are more than a score of instances in which “and” is used to stress continuity. Thomas uses the word “And” as the first word in four of the eleven lines of his poem, including the first, the last, and the central single-line second stanza. Indeed, the poem begins with the word *And* as if to suggest, at the very outset of this poem based on this old and well-known Biblical story, that something has preceded even what was there being told and is here being retold, that something had gone before, that something is continuing, and that it is something that was known before, before that first beginning, and that it is here beginning again in this new telling, this *new retelling*, of the story in Thomas’s poem’. ‘“This Is What Art Could Do”: An Exercise in Exegesis— R. S. Thomas’s “*Souillac: Le Sacrifice d’Abraham*,”’ in *Religion and the Arts*, 4.3 (2000), 382. My emphasis. Curiously, Davis does not mention Kierkegaard’s fascination with the Abraham-Isaac story, although he does so in his final version of the paper, ‘Fathers and Sons’, which is the seventh chapter of his *R. S. Thomas: Poetry and Theology*.

prosopopoeial non-voicing of the original image. The image does indeed ‘speak’ but its words, as Thomas construes them, articulate the opposite to what Jongkind presumably intended. The picture is not so much an object of scrutiny but, as is so often the case with these poems, a point of departure for dramatization and speculation. Thomas’s narrative-centred thematizing of the image alternates in focus between his ‘reading’ of *Jongkind’s* representation (or reading) of the scene, the picture’s nominal subject, and his own understanding of what is ‘actually’ depicted. For Thomas, the picture is a kind of ‘figured curtain’, to use Shelley’s phrase, simultaneously screening and divulging what it proposes to represent. Furthermore, interpreted as iconotext, ‘Jongkind: The Beach at Sainte-Adresse’ clearly goes some way toward invalidating Plato’s and Lessing’s robust disparagement of textuality. It is obvious here that the poet’s pen is indeed sharper than the draughtsman’s pencil, Thomas’s narrative or temporal response to Jongkind’s spatial representation transforming a fairly characterless object into one brimful with anticipation, pathos, and depictive equivocality.<sup>35</sup>

The displacement and subsequent recalibration of painting’s ‘static’ narrative is also evident in ‘Monet: The Bas-Breau Road’ (*BHN*, 17). The poem contrasts the apparent motionlessness of the road with man’s impassioned desire for ‘destinations’. Transposition between image and text is also evident in the next poem, ‘Bazille: Family Reunion’ (*BHN*, 19). This remarkable iconotext expresses several interlocked themes: the dismissal of descriptive mimesis, the recasting of pictorial inertia into narrative movement, and the embracement of prosopopoeial non-voicing. Thomas impressively transforms visual/ verbal disconnectedness into vibrant and synergetic union. The picture (1867-8), one of Bazille’s best-

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<sup>35</sup> For one who throughout his life experienced ‘the painful *hiraeth* for the sea’ (*Autobiographies*, 91), it is perhaps surprising that *Between Here and Now* and *Ingrowing Thoughts* (‘Composition: John Selby Bigge’, 38) should contain only one seascape apiece. In *Impressionist Paintings in The Louvre* there are two further seascapes, one by Cézanne and one by Seurat, as well as several monochromatic reproductions of seascapes by Guillaumin and Monet. Perhaps Thomas simply felt that these pictures lacked aesthetic interest. The Cézanne (L’Estaque) is a rather unexciting combination of seascape and landscape, while the pointillist picture by Seurat (‘Port-en-Bessin. The Outer Harbour, High Tide’) would obviously not convey its ‘scintillating luminosity’, as Bazin describes it, if replicated in black and white.

known *en plein air* compositions, shows the artist's high-bourgeois extended family of parents, in-laws, siblings and cousins, with the hatchet-faced painter himself gazing censoriously out from the extreme left of the canvas. In a similar sense to 'Monet: Lady with a Parasol', the most obvious feature of the painting is the visual disagreement between the figures' various attires in the fore/ middle grounds. Bazille's father wears a starched collar, for example, and his mother a shimmering velvet gown, and the artificiality of their dress contrasts strongly with the 'naturalness' of the summer foliage in the background. Thomas, engaging this atmosphere of incongruity in the second stanza, develops it into a statement of overt contempt for 'bourgeois' artifice and commodification:

Sex? They wanted

it. Children?

Why not?

And clothes, clothes:

how they outdo

their background.

In the final stanza, however, the impending implosion of moneyed self-satisfaction is unambiguously proclaimed. Repudiation of the picture speaking *res ipsa loquitur* begins in earnest as the iconotext commences its work of narrative and synaesthetic destabilization, with, in this specific instance, an attendant and hefty foregrounding of both proleptic and dramatic irony:

Well-dressed, well-

fed; their servants

are out of sight,  
snatching a moment  
to beget offspring  
who are to overturn all this.

With these lines, iconotextual energy is almost literally concentrated into what the eighteenth century referred to as the *punctum temporis* or ‘pregnant moment’ of spatial representation: that moment in the painting’s narrative current which characterizes the focal point of the entire composition. The households’ proletarian retainers are brazenly creating the generation which will shortly annihilate their employers’ staid and superior contentment. The iconotext unthaws the frozen tableau of the image and launches us into a narrative regarding the Franco-Prussian War (in which Bazille himself was killed at the Battle of Beaune-la-Roland in 1870), the end of the Second Empire and its replacement by the Third Republic, the *revanchism* of the late nineteenth century and its culmination on the blood-drenched fields of Flanders. These hypodiegetic extrapolations may at first glance appear somewhat questionable, but it cannot be overemphasized that the iconotext *inevitably* necessitates variable ‘focalisation’ of narrative purpose. The ‘icon’, as refracted through the lens of the ‘text’, self-reflexively poses questions about its own representative status and serves as a gateway to the imaginary:

the work of art does not represent the world; it signifies the way in which it perceives and conceives of it. A work of art is mostly self-reflexive, a medium scintillating in the interstices of its appearance/ disappearance, like the blinking of an eye.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *Poetics of the Iconotext*, 16. Cf. ‘R.S. Thomas in Conversation with Molly Price-Owen’, 100: ‘when you look at some of those Impressionist paintings and you see a village street with a pedestrian plodding on his way I think it’s a natural question to ask, what is a road for, where does it go to, what’s its direction, do we have to go anywhere?’

The spatiality of the picture is transformed by the temporality of the text into a *fresh* artefact, and one both conceived and fashioned by means of narrative tension. Once we have read the poem, Bazille's painting, like the moments heralding the dénouement in a tragedy, now implies an anxious hiatus within an inexorably violent narrative. The persuasive muscle of the verb 'are' in Thomas's concluding line expresses the imminent termination of the high-bourgeois way of life, with the monochromatic reproduction of the image galvanizing the overall sense of 'black and white' contraries fastened together in unavoidable confrontation.<sup>37</sup> Again, literature is not the underprivileged sibling in the sister arts, for the text here obviously permeates the icon just as much as the icon permeates and infuses the text. Temporal and spatial diegetic levels combine and interweave to foreground the conflictual, vacillating nature of the narrative mechanism itself:

'word and image' is simply the unsatisfactory name for an unstable dialectic that constantly shifts its location in representational practices, breaking both pictorial and discursive frames and undermining the assumptions that underwrite the separation of the verbal and visual disciplines.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Commenting on Bazille's palette and eye for tone in the *Independent*, 9<sup>th</sup> June, 2006, Tom Lubbock wrote: 'Put the Family Reunion or the studio paintings into black and white reproduction, and they could easily pass as photographs'. Lubbock obviously never saw a monochromatic reproduction of the picture for, as *Between Here and Now* shows, if reproduced in this way the 'painterliness' of the composition and therefore the denial of any *trompe l'oeil* suggestiveness is self-evident. Hence, we could argue that monochrome itself adds yet another element to this iconotext's binary (or 'polyphonic') narratives of artificiality/candour; stillness/volatility; concealment/ exposure; suppression/ expression. As regards the genre of *trompe l'oeil*, even here, as Krieger points out, awareness of the picture's artificiality cannot be avoided: 'Instead of actually being fooled, as birds were said to be by Zeuxis, we are to see that we could *almost* be fooled by so artful a manipulation of painterly devices that demonstrate their illusionary power, though not by altogether fooling our never totally "innocent eye." Because we are not birds but rather are attuned to the conventional nature of the medium, we do not take it as an unqualifiedly natural sign—as a representation so transparent that we mistake it for reality, as not art at all—but instead respond to the *trompe l'oeil* as a demonstration of total artifice, as an ultimate display of the un-real character of illusion, an illusion that threatens to become a delusion but always remains only on the verge'. *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*, 208.

<sup>38</sup> *Picture Theory*, 83.

In this interpretation of iconotextual narrative tension, ‘the ear and the eye’, as William Carlos Williams has it, really do ‘lie/ down together in the same bed’.<sup>39</sup> In the same way the temporality of language displaces the spatiality of the visual, the spatial irradiates and enlarges the temporal. Mitchell, arguing that in purely semantic terms no essential difference exists between visual/ verbal representation, traces our desire to regard the sister arts as ‘opposites’ to,

the basic relationship between the self (as a speaking and seeing subject) and the other (a seen and silent object). It isn’t just that the text/ image difference “resembles” the relation of self and other, but that the most basic pictures of epistemological and ethical encounters (knowledge of objects, acknowledgement of subjects) involve optical/ discursive figures of knowledge and power that are embedded in essentialized categories like “the visual” and “the verbal” [...] It is as if we have a metapicture of the image/ text encounter, in which the word and the image are not abstractions or general classes, but

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<sup>39</sup> ‘Song’, cited in *Picture Theory*, 151. Interestingly, in a letter by Kenneth Burke to Williams dated June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1960, Burke commented on what he took to be a pun on ‘lie’ in the poem. Burke interpreted the verb as a metaphor for the binary oppositions of speaking/ non-speaking, disclosure/ obscurity, detachment/ connexion: ‘I quote from Carlyle: [...] In a symbol there is concealment yet revelation: here, therefore, by Silence and by Speech acting together, comes a doubled significance [...] I take it that the psychology implied in the esthetic of Imagism fits perfectly with what Carlyle says of “Symbols.” hence it becomes a way of both saying and not-saying, a mode of “truth” that is also in a sense a “half-lie.” And particularly because of the double-meaning of “lie” in English, whenever a writer says something such as, “Behind such-and-such, there lies such-and-such a principle,” I often try, for purely experimental purposes, reading the verb in the “wrong” sense [...] As regards your poem, I am naturally much interested in trying to see how many motivational strands might be implicit in the principle or ultimate unification stated in terms of eye and ear [...] The steps in the poem seem to strike a series of glancing blows, as each moment of stability is found to contain an element of instability that requires you to hurry on. And though the “lying” down together of eye and ear is a perfect “solution” [...] “Division” and “Unification” each have their peculiar kinds of problems, with varying ad hoc “solutions.” And I think that this lil (sic) “Song” of yours is a byoot (sic) for the way it stirs up these waters’. *The Humane Particulars: The Collected Letters of William Carlos Williams and Kenneth Burke*, ed. James H. East (Columbia: South Carolina U. P., 2003), 222. David Lloyd has explored Thomas’s artistic relationship with Williams in ‘Making it new: R. S. Thomas and William Carlos Williams’, in *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays* 8 (2003), 121-40. Daniel Westover also looks at the two poets’ use of stanza form, syntax and imagery in *R. S. Thomas: A Stylistic Biography* (Cardiff: U. W. P., 2011), 95-6, 160-2. In the ‘Probing’s’ interview, Thomas agreed with John Barnie that his use of lineation post-Eglwys-fach was influenced to some extent by Williams. See *Miraculous Simplicity*, 43-4.

concrete figures, characters in a drama, stereotypes in a Manichean allegory, or interlocutors in a complex dialogue.<sup>40</sup>

Mitchell's phenomenological explanation regarding the origins of text/ image antagonism is convincing. In point of fact, we could harness an explanation such as this to account for the desire to situate specifically religious binarisms (apophatic/ cataphatic predication; prayer as speaking/ non-speaking; deific silence as speechlessness/ loquacity, etc.) in persistent and unflinching hostility. Due to the iconotext's compulsion to coalesce the ostensibly dissonant—its stimulation, as Louvel fluently phrases it, of 'the "becoming-image" of the text and the "becoming-text" of the image'<sup>41</sup>—we should welcome rather than rebuff its metaphoric/ metonymic oscillations and analogical/ narrative transgressions. As Louis Marin suggests, writing on *hypotyposis* or vivid 'word-picturing', it is the very tension produced by these dialectically-centred relationships between word and image that enable the viewer-reader of the iconotext to 'voice' the visuality of the spatial whilst simultaneously 'picturing' the temporality of the verbal:

it is not language, discourse or words which paint things in the "figure of style by imitation" to the point of creating a painting, but the image, the painting, the representation of painting which, through its specific "figures", produces sounds and noises to the point of creating a voice. On the other hand, a second, "theoretical" hypotyposis should make one see, through its own features and language phrases, the paintings it chose to activate the former, but through this

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<sup>40</sup> *Picture Theory*, 161-2. Mitchell calls the modernist desire for aesthetic purity a 'utopian fantasy'. He means by this that since no amount of description can really 'depict' at all (in the Platonic sense of *enargeia*), ekphrasis as an 'accurate' vocalization of the spatial artefact is literally impossible. As Mitchell rather wittily puts it, 'Words can "cite", but never "sight" their objects'. *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>41</sup> *Poetics of the Iconotext*, 186.



detour and return, it should make one hear, through the text and its graphemes, in its margins, what they hide in the artifacts of utterances and discourse—voice. The voice (“voix”) that I cannot help but hear as the phonic echo of *seeing* (“voir”); the voice that I cannot help but think as one of the key notions of *saying*. To make one see a voice would be a strange undertaking, and perhaps the epitome of the undertaking named the representation of painting.<sup>42</sup>

Hypotyposis as ‘visualized/ vocalized activation’ or, a more condensed version of the figure, diatyposis (in the same way that metaphor is shorter than allegory, for instance), forms the axis of several interconnecting diegetic components in ‘Cézanne: The Repentant Magdalen’ (*BHN*, 29). This is the first of the small number of obviously religious iconotexts within the collection.<sup>43</sup> The painting shows Mary Magdalene in what legend holds was her thirty year period of penance following the Resurrection. Cézanne positions three tears above her head (a reference to the further legend that her tears turned to diamonds and pearls as they fell) and a rather horrific-looking *momento mori* to her immediate right. In his choice of subject-matter, of course, Cézanne is maintaining a deep-rooted tradition, or narrative, of artistic portrayal; Titian, Domenico Feti, Luis de Carbajal and Georges de La Tour, as well as many others, all depicted Christ’s most important woman disciple performing acts of reparation. Within the specific bind of the iconotext, however, Mary Magdalene’s own story of transgression and absolution is presented in parallel with the wider narrative of kenotic Christology. Apart from the obvious foregrounding of theological complexity in regard to the paired themes of sin and salvation—the allusion to Lady Macbeth’s half-believed dismissal of her own sin in ll.3-5

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<sup>42</sup> ‘Aux marges de la peinture: voir la voix’, in *De la représentation* (Paris: Seuil/ EHESS, 1994), 330. Cited in Louvel, 180.

<sup>43</sup> The others are: ‘Gauguin: The Alyscamps at Arles’ (*BHN*, 59); Van Gogh: The Church at Auvers’ (*BHN*, 65); ‘Gauguin: Breton Village in the Snow’ (*BHN*, 71); ‘Monet: Rouen Cathedral: Full Sunshine’ (*BHN*, 73); ‘Rousseau: The Snake Charmer’ (*BHN*, 75).

shows how problematic our understanding of redemption can be—the syntactically ‘isolated’ clauses, ‘She loved/ much, so is free/ of remorse’, with our eyes inevitably flitting back at this point to the image, prompt us to reflect upon the Passion narrative. The text overlays the ‘original’ icon with further iconographies of the Stabat Mater, the Mater Dolorosa and the Pietá. The reference to the (weeping) ‘Daughters/ of Jerusalem’ in ll.6-7 makes the embedding or even primacy of the Passion narrative within Cézanne’s painting *visually* perspicuous. This of course is a direct quotation from Luke 23:26-31 (and forms the eighth Station of the Cross, a complete narrative of the Passion from the condemnation by Pilate to the placing of Christ’s body in the tomb); hence, the imagery leads us to the (re)representation of the tears as ‘three hooks’ or, to extend and broaden the image, the three crosses of Golgotha or even the three nails pinioning Christ Himself. The poem therefore contains at its thematic core the central paradox of the *theologia crucis*. In its synthesis of spatial and temporal representation, this iconotext is almost literally a diptych, although its ‘hinge’, that is, the narrative adhesive joining word and image together, performs the dualistic function of both fusing *and* separating the two panels of the composition.<sup>44</sup> We are propelled into analeptic and proleptic conjectures, visual superimpositions and verbal/ referential heterogeneity, the iconotext again displacing *and* reinforcing our preliminary recognition of its nominal subject.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> In extension of this idea, Nina M. Athanassoglou-Kallmyer points out that the painting may have been inspired by the diptych-like votive woodcut prints which Cézanne likely saw at the sanctuary of Sainte-Baume. *Cézanne and Provence: The Painter in His Culture* (Chicago: C. U. P., 2003), 71.

<sup>45</sup> It is worth quoting Davies again: ‘The rejection of the sexual in “The Repentant Magdalen” is not only unconvincing [...] but the attempts at calm assertion—“She loved/ much, so is free/ of remorse”, or “What she repents of/ is no matter”—are at odds with the formlessness towards which the poem as a whole is impelled. The resulting tension dramatizes the possibility of break-up, of anarchic collapse, rather than a notion of spiritual serenity [...] As for art: the narrator turns *that* into a cosy construct in which he struggles to believe. He writes, of the anguished, repentant Magdalen, that

The painter  
standing aside has shown  
us eternity’s rainbow  
after the human storm.

An approach to experience that does not disturb, that does not penetrate, is hardly art. The triteness of these lines and, in particular, of their central “rainbow” image, is a clear demonstration that the narrator’s desperate glances are not more than attempts to evade a decadent and confusing world’. ‘Attempts to Evade: R. S. Thomas’s

The repudiation of imagistic and narrative stability is also evident in ‘Manet: The Balcony’ (*BHN*, 31). Here, drifting perspectives (‘We watch them. They watch/ what?’) and inertia/ activity binarism (‘One’s hands/ are together as if/ in applause’) again suggest that viewing is praxis or self-reflexive development.<sup>46</sup> Emphasis on textual elision of visual portrayal is also apparent in ‘Pissarro: The Louveciennes Road’ (*BHN*, 33). In this poem, the nonchalant dismissal of the two ‘anchoring’ questions in the first and second stanzas (‘April afternoon?’; ‘Going home?’) and re-engagement of the ‘Monet: The Bas-Bréau Road’ chronotope, accentuate the dislodgment of spatial motionlessness by temporal animation.<sup>47</sup> In ‘Cézanne: The Bridge at Maincy’ (*BHN*, 49), the road chronotope is modified slightly to stress for a third time within the volume spatial/ temporal disruption: ‘Who bothers/ where this road goes?’ (‘The Bas-Bréau Road’); ‘Has a bridge/ to be crossed?’ (‘The Bridge at Maincy’). The

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“Impressions”, 142-3. There is much that could be said here—the poem seems rather tightly formed, for example, with the reengagement of ‘water’ imagery at its conclusion (with obvious symbolic overtones of baptism and therefore absolution) rousing a strong feeling of structural coherence—but it is sufficient to point to some of those Biblical passages which have the rainbow as their central figurative device: ‘And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all generations: I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and earth.’ Genesis 9: 12-13; ‘Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. And when I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of one speaking’. Ezekiel 1: 28; ‘Then I saw another mighty angel coming down from heaven, wrapped in a cloud, with a rainbow over his head, and his face was like the sun, and his legs like pillars of fire’. Revelation 10: 1. Davies’s reworking of his two earlier papers, ‘“Pessimism and Its Counters”: *Between Here and Now and After*’, in *Miraculous Simplicity*, 225-43, again refuses to acknowledge the obvious foregrounding of the Passion narrative/ visual ‘replacement’ of Mary Magdalene with the Virgin Mary in ‘Cézanne: The Repentant Magdalen’. The painting, says Davies, 226: ‘offers a mysterious, ambiguous portrayal of what seems to be Mary Magdalen at the foot of the Cross, her body tense with anguish, her profiled face showing anguish softening into calm’. As the poem is entitled ‘The Repentant Magdalen’, why Davies should impute ambiguity as regards the figure depicted is itself rather mysterious. Later on, Davies writes that the poem, ‘posits escape through repentance, through Christ’s love that will “clear the flesh/ of its offences” and deprive the sexual life of all importance’. 235. The tacked-on final clause here obviously exposes Davies’ religious preconceptions, because thankfulness for the grace of purity is obviously not the same as proclaiming the sexual life to be irrelevant.

<sup>46</sup>Bazin’s note on ‘Manet: The Balcony’ provides substantial critical ballast for Davies’s sexually-referenced interpretation of the collection as a whole, and so it is surprising Davies does not mention the painting in any detail: ‘Berthe Morisot was the model. She is sitting on a stool on the left of the picture. Standing near her is Jenny Claus, who later married a friend of Manet, the painter Prins. Standing between the two of them is the painter, Guillemet. The model for the young boy in the shadows at the back carrying a dish filled with food was Léon Koella-Leenhoff, who passed for Madame Manet’s young brother, but who was really her natural son, though it is doubtful if Manet was the father’. *Impressionist Paintings in the Louvre* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958), 116. If one knows this, then the implied pun on ‘surmount’ in the penultimate line becomes much more obvious.

<sup>47</sup>In addition to the obvious chronotope there is also in the concluding stanza (‘Going home?// Yes, but not bothering/ to arrive’) a variation of the earlier poems’ travelling ‘in itself’/ travelling ‘for purpose’ principal dialectic. The foregrounding of this opposition between the projection of termini and the ways in which one sets out to attain those termini, perhaps makes us recall the 1974 *Listener* piece again with its argument that in order to find God ‘there is no need to go anywhere from here’.

concluding image of the latter poem, through its vehicle of optical conversion, emphasizes the complex interchange between the passivity of looking and *watching*'s dynamic, self-reflexive vigour:

awaiting  
 the traveller's return [...]  
 to  
 watch for the face's  
  
 water-lily to emerge  
  
 from the dark depths  
 as quietly as the waxen  
 moon from among clouds.

The clear allusion here to the Narcissus myth, a common trope in Thomas's poetry from the early 1960s onwards, as Katie Gramich has shown,<sup>48</sup> compounds the text's general idea that watching can entail both recognition and misrecognition, detection and obscurity.<sup>49</sup> The text prosopopoeically elicits not the confident equilibrium of Cézanne's canvas—its 'balanced character', as Bazin describes it<sup>50</sup>—but the stammering hesitancy of existential self-

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<sup>48</sup> 'Mirror and Mirror Games: Self and M(o)ther in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas', in *Echoes to the Amen*, 132-48. Gramich argues that the contemplative stance of Narcissus is attractive to Thomas because it affords the opportunity for both escaping *and* capturing the self: '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 [...] The rapt gaze of Narcissus becomes a way of figuring a retreat from the world of humans and the machine, a turning aside to embrace an idealistic quest for spiritual truth and beauty'. 133-39. This dialectic of identification *and* misidentification provides the centralizing principle of the ekphrastic mode itself.

<sup>49</sup> This theme is brilliantly caught and expounded by the closing lines of 'Looking Glass' (*EA*, 40): 'Like one eternally/ in ambush, fast or slow/ as I may raise my head, it raises// its own, catching me in the act,/ disarming me by acquaintance,/ looking full into my face as often/ as I try looking at it askance'.

<sup>50</sup> *Impressionist Paintings in the Louvre*, 198.

interrogation. The moderately archaic noun-adjective constructions ('face's// water-lily'; 'waxen/ moon') and their counterbalancing by more somatic and commonplace referential terms ('bridge', 'handrail'), suggest additional contrast between consciousness in itself and that which secures consciousness within a particular temporal moment. In the same way that viewing *itself* is composite (especially of course as explored within, and through, Cubist art), consciousness originates from the multifactorial intermingling of sense-impressions. The *act* of viewing, or perceiving, produces a complicated amalgam of the initially discordant.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the concluding extended image of the face-moon implants a further 'object' into the painting, for when one returns to the canvas one cannot help *but* see the white blob on the river's surface as Thomas describes it. A distinctive form of 'over-painting' has occurred. The reflection of one of the bridge's stone arcs, largely unnoticeable in the 'original' picture, has become now the visual/ spatial centre of the entire composition. With this iconotext, perhaps more than any other in the collection, the erroneousness of Lessing's division between the spatial and the temporal is not only demonstrated but made *spatially* palpable. Thomas's poem has changed, one might even say irrevocably, the viewer's future comprehension of the picture.

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<sup>51</sup>In connection with this analysis, a further gloss with reference to William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens is perhaps useful: 'The Modernists [...] assigned to creativity a different origin and end than did the Romantics. The twentieth century poet became less the recipient than the agent of perception: Discriminations had to precede connections, and only analysis yielded provisional reconstruction. The deformity or formlessness of modern life required decreation as a condition for creation, reduction as the prerequisite for invention. The calculated wildness of Williams' evocation of these dual aspects of the imagination in *Spring and All* (1923) represents his attempt to recapture the dionysian rapture of the Romantics for his own post-Nietzschean, Modernist purposes [...] The completion of the work [...] carries Williams past the anarchism of Dada and Futurism into a recreative effort closer to Cubism, an effort that must be maintained from moment to moment [...] for Stevens too sensation is not just a passively received impression but an actively and accurately achieved response. Stevens is just as clear as Williams about the Cubist conviction that "modern reality is a reality of decreation": "When Braque says 'The senses deform, the mind forms,' he is speaking to poet, painter, musician and sculptor." 'Albert Gelpi, 'Stevens and Williams: The Epistemology of Modernism', in *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*, 6-7. The Stevens quotations are taken from 'The Relations between Poetry and Painting'. Impressionism itself, of course, is *the* art movement concerned with revitalizing perception and in this context it is worth quoting part of Bazin's introduction: 'For a century painters had been tentatively looking for something which Monet was the first to find... the art of seeing. Other artists always looked through a screen of antecedent art forms; Corot through Poussin and Claude, Theodore Rousseau through Ruisdael and Hobbema. To see properly is the hardest thing. It requires genius. Most people see by way of their parents, their masters, or the social milieu in which they live. Sometimes on a youthful morning the scales fall from their eyes and the world appears, but only for a second, and then for the rest of their lives they look through that sombre curtain of images to the conditioned universe behind. Only painters and poets really see [...] Man often needs a generation to "see" something which he himself has created. The organ of looking is a sluggish one in the brain'. *Impressionist Paintings in the Louvre*, 12-13.

Something similar to this occurs in ‘Renoir: Muslim Festival at Algiers’ (*BHN*, 47), where the closing image of ‘the detached/ ocean with its cerulean stare’ superimposes on the original canvas. If one did not know the painting, then it is almost certain one would perceive the dark band in the top left as not sea but sky, and so the personification again inserts a ‘new’ object into the viewer’s frame of reference. ‘Cerulean’ is an interesting adjective to use, and apart from its rhythmical aptness (the metrically-clipped ‘azure’ or ‘cobalt’, for example, would not dovetail so euphoniously with the 13 syllables preceding the final clause), Thomas probably decided upon it because it transmits clear references to the art of painting itself. ‘Cerulean’, on the artist’s palette, denotes various shades of blueness, so by fastening the personification to a painterly term, Thomas is drawing attention to the fact that we are viewing something manufactured; therefore, he is also perhaps suggesting the ‘ornamental’ nature of painting’s ‘mimetic’ response. We could also say that the adjective reinforces a specifically theological reading of the poem, for Thomas as a classical scholar would have known that ‘cerulean’ is derived from ‘caelulum’, a diminutive of ‘caelum’, which is ‘heaven’ as well as ‘sky’. Thus, we can argue that here too a form of ‘overpainting’ occurs. Thomas perceives the dancing girls as cocks on a dung heap (‘combs and wattles [...] background of dung’)—a perception which has no basis in the actual painting—and so the tension between cerulean/ heavenly and the description of the girls makes *us* perceive the girls in a completely different way. The description calls to mind the proverb, ‘every cock crows on his own dunghill’, and so Thomas seems to be suggesting that man lacks the imaginative capacity to *see* wider, theological truths.

Iconotextual repositioning of the co-ordinates of art is evident even with such an apparently ‘static’ painting as Cézanne’s ‘The Card Players’ (*BHN*, 51). ‘The fissure in representation [...] the blank space between text and image’ of ekphrastic creative writing, as

Mitchell terms it, is filled by the poem's atmosphere of 'delayed' temporality.<sup>52</sup> The entire poem is driven by interplay between intrusion and immobility, fixity and disturbance. The sharp qualification of the two opening stanzas' verbs and adverbs accentuate temporal and spatial redefinition:

And neither of them has said:

Your lead.

An absence of trumps

will arrest movement.

Knees almost touching

hands almost touching,

they are far away

in time in a world

of equations.<sup>53</sup>

With the 'reappearance' of the painting as iconotext, the ostensible inertia of 'The Card Players' is subverted by diegetic deduction. The canvas now evokes not what Bazin glosses as 'the principles of the strictest symmetry',<sup>54</sup> but a kind of spatial lop-sidedness, a moment not so much 'caught' as currently underway. The opening conjunction, for instance, immediately begins the process of narrative extrapolation (it conveys an achrony, in fact, a narrative incident without temporal connection to other incidents) with the delicate movement from past to future

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<sup>52</sup> *Picture Theory*, 69.

<sup>53</sup> The oscillating lineation itself, of course, implies perceptual readjustment. As Daniel Westover observes, post *H'm*: '[Thomas'] lines reflect the modern age: its communication and language, its instability and fragmentation, its evolving metaphors, its starved spirit [...] Technique must constantly be refined if the poet is to master modern frequencies of communication and use them in his worship'. *R. S. Thomas: A Stylistic Biography*, 144.

<sup>54</sup> *Impressionist Paintings in the Louvre*, 206.

tense ('has said' / 'will arrest') implying fluidity rather than motionlessness. As iconotext, the viewer-reader is compelled into filmic 'scanning' of the 'poem-picture': 'Knees *almost* touching, / hands *almost* touching'. Bazin's comment that 'There is nothing to attract the eye but the players',<sup>55</sup> is succinctly undercut by the rapid, noun-adjectival qualifications of the concluding stanza: 'The pipe without / smoke, the empty / bottle, the light / on the wall are the clock / they go by'. As in several poems already discussed, the 'collaboration' between the spatial and the temporal in 'Cézanne: The Card Players' is governed by the rhetoric of resistance (although not of course in Lessing's sense) rather than one of alliance and cooperation. Thomas is not taking us into the centre of the painting's labyrinth by means of ekphrastic envoicing—leading us, as it were, with the thread of mimetic representation—but is showing how the image and its verbalized 'reflection' are governed by equivalent dynamics of sameness *and* otherness. With its narrative movement, word-pictures, and temporal thematizing of spatial depiction, the text 'about' the painting stimulates *visual* re-examination in the same way that the painting itself demands to be 'read'. As Mieke Bal remarks, dichotomy and congruence, hybridity and separation, are the delineating characteristics of *both* 'iconic' and 'textual' portrayal:

“Verbality” or “wordness” is indispensable in visual art, just as *visuality* or “imageness” is intrinsic to verbal art [...] verbality (or “wordness”) refers to a kind of discursivity that is not logocentric, *visuality* (or “imageness”) that is not imago-centric; neither is tied to a particular medium.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *Impressionist Paintings in the Louvre*, 206.

<sup>56</sup> *Reading “Rembrandt,” Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*, The Northrop Frye Lectures in Literary Theory (Cambridge: C. U. P., 1991), 27-8. Cited in Louvel, 174. Emphasis in original.



If movement beyond inter-arts dialogue based on the analogical model of *ut pictura poesis* is the interpretative centre of iconotextual understanding, then to attempt the ekphrastic ‘unlocking’ of the picture’s hermeneutical code by means of prosopopoeial envoicing is a fruitless exercise. Such an interpretative strategy would be equivalent, perhaps, to a wholly biographical or naïvely historicist interpretation of the literary artefact.<sup>57</sup> In ‘Degas: Women Ironing’ (*BHN*, 53), the text’s vocalization of its nominal subject clearly departs from the calculated ‘realism’ of Degas’s response to the laundresses. Thomas’s poem ‘speaks’ the canvas by drawing attention to its *non*-mimetic authenticity:

this is art  
 overcoming permanently  
 the temptation to answer  
 a yawn with a yawn

*Pace* Vendler, the commanding decisiveness of the initial clause (‘this *is* art’) foregrounds not ‘the “eternity” of visual art’,<sup>58</sup> but the artificiality of Degas’s depiction (‘this is *art*’).<sup>59</sup> In fact,

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<sup>57</sup> I do not mean by this that Heffernan’s definition of *ekphrasis* is incorrect, for Heffernan advances *prosopopoeia* as one of the staples of his analysis. The others are ‘conversion’ (of word into image and vice versa), ‘friction’ (between word and image and vice versa), and Leonardo’s *paragone* (in Heffernan’s reinterpretation, that which occurs when one realises the text and picture are governed by comparable ‘anti-mimetic’ paradigms). See *Museum of Words*, 136.

<sup>58</sup> ‘R. S. Thomas and Painting’, 73.

<sup>59</sup> Bazin points out that the painting is one of several by Degas depicting washerwomen and notes the artist’s meticulous attention to compositional technique: ‘In 1869 [Degas] painted a *Woman Ironing* for the first time [...] After that date he continued to exploit this theme which he succeeded in varying to the most astounding extent by changing the pose, the setting, and above all the lighting—the play of light, which he diversified as much as possible by means of artificial illumination—transparencies, reflections from the washing lying flat or drying on cords from the ceiling’. *Impressionist Paintings in the Louvre*, 208. Bazin’s description of the painting as a purposefully *manufactured* entity is perhaps the origin of Thomas’s forceful pronouncement, ‘this is art’. Bazin also emphasizes Degas’s relationship to the literary realism current at the time, especially the Goncourts’ *Manette Salomon* and Zola’s *L’Assommoir*. Of course, the term ‘literary realism’ is somewhat oxymoronic, as a ‘reproduction’ can only be formed through the tightly-controlled selection of material and the presentation of that material through creative fashioning and transformation. ‘Realism’ is as much an imaginative or inventive construct as ‘surrealism’. Degas is not merely ‘presenting’ the laundresses but is conscientiously manufacturing both them *and* the context in which they appear.

the demonstrative pronoun itself seems to contain at least a tremor of denotative ambiguity, as its referent could of course be the picture, or the poem *as* poem, or the poem's 'response' to the picture, or Degas's decision to portray, as Vendler has it, 'the unaesthetic spectacle of ordinary life'.<sup>60</sup> The iconotext here envoices the fact of its very envoicing. It prosopopoeically demonstrates the temporality of text *and* icon or, to gloss by way of prosopopoeia's etymology, 'masks' artificiality through additional self-conscious artifice. The text of 'Degas: Women Ironing', in other words, does not ventriloquize its icon by attempting to duplicate a *punctum temporis*, but rather discloses both its own, and the icon's, structural and visual anatomy:

All literary descriptions are sights [...] the writer must, through an initial ritual, transform the "real" into a painted (framed) object; after that, he can unhook this object, draw it from its painting; in other words, de-pict it (to de-pict is to unroll the carpet of codes, to refer, not from a language to a referent, but from a code to another code); realism [...] thus consists not in the copying of the real, but in copying a (painted) copy of the real.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> 'R. S. Thomas and Painting', 72. I may well be overlooking subtleties, but Vendler appears to contradict herself at certain key moments in her analysis: 'The women, it is clear, have been turned into statues by their nominal and past-participial verbal clothing. Insofar as the labouring of the second woman has any trajectory at all, her "decreasing function" bears her towards the paralysis of her yawning neighbour [...]. What does the "antiphony" of the alternately-indented lineation "stand for"? I think it mimics the wandering of the watcher's eye, and perhaps even the trajectory of the painter's brush as the canvas is in process. We can imagine the artist, saying between his teeth as he paints the woman on the left, "One hand—yes, where—on cheek the other—where—yes, on the bottle—mouth? open—all right, that's that one;—now for the other—her neighbour—now where are her hands—yes, not apart, both together, clasped—but not the way hands would be clasped in prayer, these are one over the other, for more pressure on the iron;—now her head, yes, bent; bent why? how? as she gets tired and tired—". Ibid., 73-4. It is interesting that Vendler has attempted to understand the picture by *narrativizing* it through the diction of the poem, thereby (unintentionally?) showing that the women are not, in fact, 'statuesque' at all.

<sup>61</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), 61. Cited in Louvel, 176.

This iconotextual breaking of the ‘fourth wall’ in order to stimulate perceptual rejuvenation is also apparent in ‘Gauguin: Breton Landscape, the Mill’, (*BHN*, 57). Self-reflexive ‘visuality’ forms the nucleus of the text:

The eye is to concentrate  
 on the tree gushing  
 over the bent-backed woman  
 with her companion and  
 dog. But there is so much  
 besides [...]

The nomadic depictions refuse the painting spatial consistency and again implant ‘objects’ into our frame of reference, for it is not at all obvious when reproduced in monochrome that ‘the bent-backed woman’ is even there. Thomas is forcing us to visualize the *picture* and integrate for ourselves its non-mimetic constituents. The final metaphoric-similetic embellishment of the ‘whey-faced cloud/ agog as at a far sill’, recalls the conclusion of ‘Renoir: Muslim Festival at Algiers’ (*BHN*, 47)—‘the detached/ ocean with its cerulean stare’—and thus compounds the text’s central contention that ‘watching’ entails a form of symbiotic *praxis*. The next poem, ‘Gauguin: The Alyscamps at Arles’ (*BHN*, 59), projects similar contrasts between the ‘original’ painting and the painting’s re-emergence as iconotext. The brush-strokes motif in the last stanza (used also in ‘Monet: Portrait of Madame Gaudibert’, *BHN*, 23) and the specific reference to colouration (with the monochromatic contrast again stimulating our awareness of artificiality) draw attention to painting as *image-making*, therefore further underscore the essential fallaciousness of the spatial/ temporal disjunction.<sup>62</sup> The authorization to question

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<sup>62</sup> Krieger’s account of the origins of image-text ‘estrangement’ is similar to the phenomenological analysis given by Mitchell: ‘Our semiotic desire for the natural sign is a reflection of our ontological yearning: our anxiety to

pictorial veracity ('A trinity of figures—/ coming from Mass?') is also an *authorization*. The text 'writes' the icon the very moment the icon is perceived through its textual aperture.<sup>63</sup> Self-reflexive and self-conscious 'mimeticism' also permeates 'Gauguin: La Belle Angèle' (*BHN*, 61), where the text's grammar of artifice interrupts the symbolic stability of the canvas: 'We know someone *like* this./ An *imaginary* circle/ separates her from the blue' [...] 'Beside her/ in bronze is her other self, the cat-like *image*'.

Art or mimesis both scrutinizing and portraying itself is the leitmotif of 'Van Gogh: Portrait of Dr. Gachet' (*BHN*, 63). In the same way that the dexterous wordplay in the final three lines ('a doctor/ becoming patient himself/ of art's diagnosis') calls attention to art as artifice/ artfulness, Van Gogh's stylized portrait eschews the straightforwardly 'mimetic' in favour of acquaintance of the subject through 'impressionistic' defamiliarization. Moreover, because the painting is so well-known (with the possible exception of Cézanne's 'The Card Players' it is probably the most instantly recognizable of all the pictures Thomas has chosen), one inevitably begins the process of narrativizing it through the poignant story of Van Gogh's final months as rendered in the earlier iconotext, 'Cézanne: Dr. Gachet's House' (*BHN*, 35). Dr. Gachet's 'eyes like quinine' and his 'medicative// power', have failed to cure 'the earless painter [...] with his mind in pieces'. The iconotext later in the volume ('Portrait of Dr. Gachet') steers us back to

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find an order or structure objectively, "naturally", "out there"—beyond society as well as ourselves—that would authorize the signs and forms that subjectivity projects and that we then want—nay require—others to respond to and acknowledge as being there'. *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*, 237. In relation to *Between Here and Now* and *Ingrowing Thoughts*, Krieger's account could be used to explain Thomas's fascination with the ekphrastic genre (ekphrasis as an attempt to capture the ontologically 'transcendent'), and also his very writing of poetry itself; composing poetry, or 'image-making', it could be argued, is Thomas's attempt to assuage 'ontological yearning'.

<sup>63</sup> This is true even with the apparent 'stasis' of a still-life painting. As Krieger observes, the term 'still-life' is heavily oxymoronic. Krieger actually favours the more intensely self-contradictory French term, *nature morte*. Even the conscious 'realism' of seventeenth-century Dutch still-lives, for instance, 'can be seen as forcing us to sense the fact that they *are* paintings, representations that create the illusion of their apparent objects through the manipulation of alien, quite unrelated materials, artificial materials [...] the paintings are to be perceived as self-referential demonstrations of the illusory powers arising from the workings of the painterly medium, rather than be accepted as transparent imitations of [...] an apparently identical, or at least matching, "reality." This "reality," with which the natural-sign painting is supposed to have a one-to-one relation, cannot be asserted to have been there to check the painting's "accuracy," since the reality we see has been created for the viewer *by* the painting, that compound of canvas and pigment whose clues have worked with the viewer's previous experience to create what is now serving as the viewer's illusionary "reality."' *Ibid.*, 207-8.

the earlier, and thus establishes narrative homogeneity between the two very different pictures. Spatial disturbance is additionally occasioned by textual ‘implantation’, for Thomas’s reference to ‘the equivocal/ foxglove’ only really makes sense if we know (as Bazin points out, 234) that digitalis symbolically represents a medical specialization in heart disease. Once we become aware of this, the painting possesses an obvious visual metaphor (Van Gogh’s ‘broken heart’ and Dr. Gachet’s ‘failure’ to mend it) as a consequence of textual/ temporal portrayal.<sup>64</sup> Temporality, to subvert the relationship between text and image as promoted by Lessing’s martial metaphor, has once more stormed the ramparts of the spatial, with verbal kinesis firstly challenging, then overpowering, visual immobility.

The ekphrastic sequence in *Between Here and Now* concludes with three religious iconotexts and a further iconotext regarding the nature of pictorial representation itself and its connexion to the mimetic impulse. ‘Gauguin: Breton Village in the Snow’ (*BHN*, 71), again violates the assumed *punctum temporis* by imposing narrative energy upon spatial motionlessness: ‘This is the village/ to which the lost traveller/ came’ (my emphasis). The inferred emergence of spring/ resurrection in the final image, ‘the earth is asleep,/ too, but nearer awaking’, also reverses the antecedent diction of wintry inertia. ‘Monet: Rouen Cathedral, Full Sunshine’ (*BHN*, 73) enlarges the theme of narrativized ‘defamiliarization’ of the spatial by immediately leading us *from* the picture into a wholly ‘temporalized’ location:

But deep inside  
are the chipped figures  
with their budgerigar faces,

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<sup>64</sup> The insertion of a ‘new object’ into the painting’s visual field is arguably also evident in the earlier iconotext when *returned to* through the narrative entrance opened by the later one. The black rut on the right hand side of the road in ‘Cézanne: Dr. Gachet’s House’ now seems a depiction of Van Gogh himself, a hunched, indistinct, limping figure, making in desperation for Dr. Gachet’s house to be mended ‘by the light of those eyes’. Once more, the ‘reappearance’ of the painting as iconotext has resulted in a significantly altered *visual* entity, and therefore the viewer-reader becomes more attentive to the actual *mechanics* of pictorial representation.

a sort of divine  
 humour in collusion  
 with time. Who but  
 God can improve  
 by distortion?

The opening metaphor triggers a statement pertaining to defamiliarization's importance in conceptual understanding: enhancement by 'distortion' allows truth to be both recognized and released. The carvings/ grotesques on the pillars may not have been grotesques initially, but they now look like 'budgerigar faces' because the original stone has deteriorated. If this reading is correct—and, given 'chipped', one cannot avoid that sense of corrosion—then the image would seem to suggest an atmosphere of temporality. Birds do not sit totally immobile, and so the metaphor suggests a *blending* of the temporal and the eternal.<sup>65</sup> Thus, intellectual development by means of perceptual revision enables the elucidation *of* divinity. The extension and modification of the avian image in the second and third stanzas provides a narrativized adaptation of the original conceit:

There is  
 a stone twittering in  
 the cathedral branches,  
 the excitement of migrants  
 newly arrived from a tremendous  
 presence.

We have no food

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<sup>65</sup> I am grateful to Tony Brown for bringing this interpretation to my attention.

for them but our  
prayers.

If the carvings were initially of angels, then here they have metamorphosed back *into* angels; in this poem, worshipping ‘on a wing and a prayer’ is the very foundation of religious commitment. The following iconotext, ‘Rousseau: The Snake Charmer’ (*BHN*, 75), commences with another avian reference, although this time the image is used to suggest a prelapsarian theme:

A bird not of this  
planet; serpents earlier  
than their venom; plants  
reduplicating the moon’s  
  
paleness.

This text, perhaps the most religiously complicated in the entire volume, seems to turn on a sense of interchange *between* pre- and postlapsarian thematizing of the icon. Despite Thomas’s use of the masculine pronoun in the third stanza, the sinister, flute-playing minstrel is in actual fact Eve, the figure’s femininity being obvious in Bazin’s colour reproduction. Therefore, the ‘dark’ which listens to the tune and ‘withholds [...] the boneless/ progeny’—presumably a reference to Satan in the guise of the serpent—seems to *reverse* the Genesis narrative of man listening and succumbing to temptation. Instead, what appears to be foregrounded, is the *possibility* of good despite the enchantment of the serpent’s words.

The textual/ temporal dialectic of concurrent emancipation *and* obstruction of the picture or icon is apparent also in the collection's final iconotext 'Renoir: The Bathers' (*BHN*, 77). Once more, an interpretation by Davies may be employed as an argumentative foil, for the poem's diction of asexuality ('Here is flesh/ not to be peeped at' [...] 'naked/ for us to gaze/ our fill on, but/ without lust') clearly does not signify 'a sudden glimpse of an ideal world',<sup>66</sup> rather, what is suggested, is radically *defeminized* femininity. Contra both Davies and Bazin,<sup>67</sup> Thomas's 'reading' of the picture is initiated by his receptiveness towards its palpable artificiality:

This  
 is the mind's feast,  
 where taste follows  
 participation. Values  
 are in reverse  
 here. Such soft tones  
 are for the eye  
 only.

Such images do not suggest 'Platonic' representation of the abstractly feminine but the innate self-reflexivity both of artistic depiction and the perceptual mechanisms through which artistic

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Bazin, who is evoked by Davies, himself evokes Rubens. Bazin somewhat rhapsodically writes that: 'These two figures, who have gone back to a state of pristine innocence and whom he [Renoir] wanted to call nymphs rather than bathers, are soaking in a kind of primordial mud, a mixture of earth, flowers, grass and stone. The same glowing fluid circulates in their bodies and in those Eden-like meadows [...] I have known this picture for thirty years, and I have seen it change from lobster-coloured red to a softer lake tone, already beginning to take on reflections of mother-of-pearl'. *Impressionist Paintings in the Louvre*, 270. Whether or not the original painting does in fact suggest such luminous, prelapsarian splendour, is of course essentially a matter of taste. Nevertheless, it is probable that most viewers would see Renoir's stylized portrayal of the bathers (or nymphs) as Thomas does, and therefore the painting as a technical achievement regarding the nature of perception.



depiction occurs. As in several of the iconotexts previously examined, the text of ‘Renoir: The Bathers’ confronts and subsequently disintegrates the ‘fourth wall’ of its icon by way of underscoring the *non-mimetic* characteristics of iconographic portrayal: ‘These bodies,/ smooth as bells/ from *art’s* stroking’. By means of this image, Thomas is once more occluding the comfortable taxonomy of the spatial/ temporal distinction. It is the *incapacity* of visual or plastic art to transcend the restrictions of the temporal—the tactility of the extended simile ‘smooth as bells’, suggesting also, perhaps, the sculptor’s formative touch—that grants visual or plastic art its representative power. In the same way that ekphrastic ‘literality’ demands at least an assumption of non-temporal ‘inertia’, spatial representation is imbued with an inescapable rhetoric of ephemerality, instability, and metamorphosis. The final iconotext in Thomas’s ekphrastic sequence shows that artistic invention is self-consciously synthetic.<sup>68</sup>

*Ingrowing Thoughts* has not received the same amount of attention as *Between Here and Now*—Vendler, for example, states openly her preference for the earlier collection<sup>69</sup>—although its twenty-one iconotexts are of significant critical interest. In *Ingrowing Thoughts* Thomas moves from his previous concentration on impressionist art to consider post-impressionist painting and one example of sculpture. With this later interest in post-impressionist/ surrealist painting, Thomas is tracking the narrative of twentieth century artistic development and innovation. As he said to Price-Owen: ‘a friend of mine from France [Marie-Thérèse Castay] sent me a book of reproductions of paintings in the Louvre. I was going through a blank period, I suppose, poetic dryness, and in order to try and get myself back into

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<sup>68</sup>Vendler, discussing ‘Pissarro: Landscape at Chaponval’ (*BHN*, 45) by way of a gloss from Keats’ odes to autumn and the Grecian urn, says that ‘Thomas’s pastoral [...] is Keats’s “Autumn” rewritten into the stability of the urn’. ‘R. S. Thomas and Painting’, 71. This assumes that in the latter poem Keats is endeavouring to depict spatial motionlessness through narrative or temporal representation. Of course, the urn itself is a poetic fiction; as Andrew Bennett remarks, ‘Although scholars have endlessly searched museums and books to find the “original” urn, in fact all we need is here, the “words on the page”’. Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience: The Posthumous Life of Writing* (Cambridge: C, U, P., 1994), 137. Thus, it is certainly arguable that Keats, like Thomas in ‘Renoir: The Bathers’, is actually demonstrating the *manufacturing* propensities of ekphrasis rather than ekphrasis’s presumed ability to capture the ‘transcendent’.

<sup>69</sup> ‘R. S. Thomas and Painting’, 57.

writing I wrote one or two poems about those paintings, those reproduced paintings [...] Then, as I became interested in people like, de Chirico and Ben Shahn and people like that I thought I'd have a go at doing the same thing with more contemporary painters rather than going back to the Impressionists so I brought out that small book, *Ingrowing Thoughts*, based on these'.<sup>70</sup>

Again, the obvious starting point for analysis must be the volume's title, taken from the closing line of 'The Red Model: René Magritte' (*IT*, 33). If 'Between Here and Now' carries evident overtones of *hic et nunc* as *hic et ubique*, the title of the second collection of ekphrastic verse appears to suggest comparable oxymoronic implications. By definition, of course, all thought is 'ingrowing' or internal, so the prepositional qualification ('against') preceding the poem's final line, indicates that one must prohibit one's thinking from lapsing into comfortable—perhaps even solipsistic—complacency or self-satisfaction.<sup>71</sup> The two source texts for the poems, Herbert Read's *Art Now* (first published 1933), and *Surrealism* (first published 1936), consolidate a general reading of Thomas' ekphrases turning once again on the need to provoke thought into re-engagement with *itself*. The latter book comprises four papers examining the intellectual foundations of surrealism, while the former, from which most of the pictures are taken, provides a précis of developments in art following the June 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition.<sup>72</sup> The précis is predominantly concerned with the interplay

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<sup>70</sup> 'R. S. Thomas in Conversation with Molly Price-Owen', 100.

<sup>71</sup> Vendler draws a similar conclusion but interprets the title (using a gloss from Herbert's 'The Dawning') via a specifically religious perspective: 'An "ingrowing thought" is one that, satisfied with itself, has ceased to grow outward. No matter how beautiful the original object of its affections, once a thought becomes "ingrowing" it can offer no further stimulus to the moral or aesthetic nature. This poem is Thomas's prayer to be "new, tender, quick" (Herbert), forever reminded of the possibilities of spiritual resurrection'. *Ibid.*, 79. In some measure this is indeed true, although the paucity of religious texts (or iconotexts) within the collection would suggest that Thomas is also interested in more secular interpretations of what 'thought' actually entails. In conversation with the author, Tony Brown has said that the title, for him, seems to suggest something uncomfortable; an ingrowing toenail, in fact. Therefore, thought should not be cosily 'inward'; it must continually challenge/ *renew* itself if it is to develop in any significant way.

<sup>72</sup> *Art Now: An Introduction to the Theory of Modern Painting and Sculpture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948) contains the following pictures, all in monochrome, at the end of the book: 'Portrait of a Girl in a Yellow Dress: Henri Matisse'; 'Father and Child: Ben Shahn'; 'Portrait of Madame Renou: André Derain'; 'The Maid of Honour: Chaim Soutine'; 'Still-life: Carl Hofer'; 'L'Abbaye de Chartre: André Bauchant'; 'Lilac above the River: Marc Chagall'; 'The Meeting: Gustav de Smet'; 'The Good Inn: Frits van den Berghe'; 'The Child's Brain: Giorgio di Chirico'; 'The Oracle: Giorgio di Chirico'; 'The Red Model: René Magritte'; 'Encounter in the Afternoon: Paul Nash'; 'Drawing: Salvador Dali'. *Surrealism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936) contains: 'Composition: John

between ‘mental’ and ‘aesthetic’ activities, and so it is possible that this book was important in stimulating Thomas’s interest in the actual mechanics, both intellectual and aesthetic, of ekphrasis as a literary genre. *Surrealism* is also interesting, because all four of the essays are far more interested in the literary underpinnings of surrealism than its emergence as a vehicle for spatial expression. The first essay by André Breton offers a European/Marxian account of surrealism’s origins. The second by Hugh Sykes Davies provides something largely similar but this time from a specifically English perspective. The third by Paul Éluard does contain some reference to painting but is mostly about the Marquis de Sade and the fourth, by Georges Hugnet, is a discussion of French symbolist poetry from 1870-1936. If we assume that Thomas read the whole of *Surrealism*—of course, we know for a fact that he read the Introduction because he annotated it—then his interest in temporal/ spatial interplay can be traced, at least to some extent, to these four papers and their discussions about the relationships between literature and painting. Of interest in particular is the Introduction itself, as here (22-28) Read draws a distinction between ‘romanticism’ and ‘classicism’, the former of which he argues is preoccupied with ‘the evolving consciousness of mankind’ (28). Surrealism, continues Read, is largely about perceptual development; hence, it should really be understood as a ‘romantic’ movement. Because of this, Read coins the term ‘superrealism’ to describe surrealist art. Surrealist art makes more ‘real’ by ‘making strange’, and this symbiosis of ‘mimeticism’ and ‘ostranenie’, we can argue, is vividly discernible in Thomas’ ekphrastic verse.<sup>73</sup>

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Selby Bigge’; ‘La Nuit Vénitienne’; ‘Two Children menaced by a Nightingale: Max Ernest’; ‘On the Threshold of Liberty: René Magritte’; ‘Captain Cook’s Last Voyage: Roland Penrose’; ‘Drawing by a Child: Diana Brinton Lee’. ‘The Child’s Brain’, ‘The Oracle’, ‘Encounter in the Afternoon’ and ‘Drawing’ appear in both volumes. Thomas has followed Read’s sequencing in *Ingrowing Thoughts*.

<sup>73</sup> Wynn Thomas argues that Thomas ‘reads’ modern artwork ‘in terms of the secularisation of religious iconographical practices’ and the ‘moral bankruptcy and spiritual dereliction’ of the contemporary world’. *R. S. Thomas: Serial Obsessive*, 289, 280. He also maintains that the ‘duplicities of the painted image’ as presented by the Surrealists were of especial interest to Thomas, because their ‘grotesque absurdities seem[ed] to him expressive of those twisted, distorted realities of existence that the post-religious mind [had] uncovered’. *Ibid.*, In other words, Wynn Thomas argues that Surrealist art serves as a diluent of ‘normal’ identity. Before one can search for interiority and divinity, one must ‘get beneath’ the surface of selfhood.

As in *Between Here and Now*, the self-reflexivity and self-performativity of the artistic compulsion seems to provide the controlling dialectic of many of the ekphrases. The first six poems of *Ingrowing Thoughts* are all connected to an understanding of art as transformation and artifice, while ‘Composition: John Selby Bigge’ (*IT*, 38) and ‘On the Threshold of Liberty: René Magritte’ (*IT*, 45), both employ the trope of spatial portrayal as *non-verisimilitude*: ‘Painter,/ with your impressed brush,/ you forgot the look-outs’ (‘Composition: John Selby Bigge’); ‘So move/ the paintings to one side/ in the humanist’s/ gallery’ (‘On the Threshold of Liberty: René Magritte’). Immediately, then, Thomas once more appears to foreground the theme of ekphrasis as concurrently merging and disuniting spatial and temporal forms of representation. To quote Krieger once more, who, I think, has done more than any theorist to elucidate the differences between ‘modernist’ and ‘postmodernist’ interpretations of ekphrastic poetry:

The special and two-sided role assigned in language medium in poetry allows it to supervise the paradoxical coexistence of time and space, of the sensible and the intelligible, of mimesis and free-ranging expression. In the now obsolete spectrum of the arts we saw poetry caught between the extremes of the visual arts and music, and facing both ways. The old hierarchy among the arts emerging from such a framework first led to the *ut pictura poesis* injunction, then started an opposed movement all the way to music in pursuit of the non-mimetic. With modernism, the verbal arts ascend to the status of a model— in the centre and facing both ways, toward the plastic arts and toward music, and absorbing both ends into themselves. Now it is the visual arts that are to ape the semiotic duplicity of the verbal arts (*ut poesis pictura*), though they can do so only at the cost of distancing themselves the more self-consciously from any

attempt to function as natural signs, that is, by accepting their role as sign systems within an aesthetic constructed, according to poetry's requirements, on a semiotic basis.<sup>74</sup>

This passage, with its emphasis on 'Janus-faced' semioticism and the unavoidable self-performativity of 'mimetic' representation, serves as a blueprint for contemporary critical excavations into the ekphrastic mode. As in *Between Here and Now*, throughout *Ingrowing Thoughts* Thomas appears to accentuate as a central trope the notion of art as artifice. He appears to accede to the Gombrichian idea that artistic form itself, rather than external referents, is the primary denotation of the aesthetic object.<sup>75</sup>

'Portrait of a Girl in a Yellow Dress: Henri Matisse' (*IT*, 10) begins with an explicit assertion that the aesthetic compulsion necessitates not directness but obscurity: 'Windows in art/ are to turn the back on'. The diction of artificiality ('cheek/ and dressing-table, lipstick/ and lip') and the divergence between the sitter's and the artist's intentions ('a repose/ whose self-consciousness the painter/ was at pains not to conceal'), imply again the broad theme that 'art' is non-mimetic representation. In *Art Now*, Read, commenting on Oriental art such as Japanese prints, writes: 'he [the Oriental] had a work of art which fulfilled one of the primary functions of a work of art, which is to objectify our sense of visual pleasure, simply to please the sight' (65). Thomas's marginal annotation is 'Quod visum placet' ['beauty is that which being seen pleases]', the Aquinian definition of beauty which Read also quotes eight pages later. This definition stresses the interplay between *subjective* experience and aesthetic

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<sup>74</sup> *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*, 200-1. In a purely perfunctory sense there is nothing new in Krieger's argument. Norman Bryson in *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1983) also argues for the underlying 'semioticism' of pictorial representation. Seven years before Bryson's book appeared, the philosopher Nelson Goodman in *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976) proposed a comparably semiotic—or linguistic—theory of the visual arts.

<sup>75</sup> Hence Gombrich's motto, 'Making before Matching'. Gombrich means that since the form of the aesthetic object is also its *function*, we should abstain from any 'mimetic' critique and look instead at the role of visual traditions and practises (cultural, intellectual, historical) in shaping what the viewer actually *sees*. *Art and Illusion* (London: Phaidon Press, 1959), 305-6.

appreciation, a synthesis Thomas also appears to underscore in many of his ekphrases. In ‘Father and Child: Ben Shahn’ (*IT*, 13), for instance, Thomas ‘overlays’ Shahn’s canvas—as he did in the earlier ‘Cézanne: The Repentant Magdalen’—with the weighty emblematicism of Marian iconography:

Times change:  
no longer the virgin  
ample lapped: the child fallen  
in it from an adjacent heaven.<sup>76</sup>

Shahn’s painting is a powerful visual metaphor for the horrors of the twentieth-century. When interpreted as iconotext, however, the picture clearly merges the political with the religious. It is the man, not the mother, who holds the baby and the infant is vulnerably ‘human’ (indeed, a ‘human mistake’) and not divine. The mother holds not the child but, according to the poem, a picture of *her* mother; that is, a relic of a (more secure?) past is being carried into a ‘displaced future’. The painting, when returned to *through* the poem, now contrasts the gentleness of the Incarnation with the awfulness of war within the industrial era; therefore, this iconotext seems to suggest that we have reduced hopefulness itself to rubble because we have disregarded the Christian message.

In ‘Portrait of Madame Renou: André Derain’ (*IT*, 14), the iconotext immediately following ‘Father and Child: Ben Shahn’, the trope of *ut poesis pictura* attains a sort of ‘verbalized’ culmination. In this poem Thomas employs the structure of the sonnet, including

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<sup>76</sup>The poem concludes, ‘The mother has salvaged her mother’s/ portrait and carries it upside down’. This technique of openly ‘grounding’ the text in painterly nomenclature, is used by Thomas in several of his ekphrases in *Ingrowing Thoughts*. Picasso’s picture, for example, is explicitly referred to as ‘a new masterpiece’; ‘The Maid of Honour: Chaim Soutine’ (*IT*, 17) is ‘a portrait/ begun and half, as it were,/ rubbed out’; ‘Composition: John Selby Bigge’ (*IT*, 38) begins with ‘In the foreground’ while the following iconotext, ‘La Nuit Vénitienne: Paul Éluard’ (*IT*, 41) commences, ‘In the background’. It seems that by employing a self-conscious vocabulary of art as manufacturing, Thomas is drawing attention to ‘mimesis’ as non-replication and, therefore, to the innate subjectivity of the perceptual act.

the customary ‘turn of thought’ between octave and sestet. The sestet’s emphasis on the picture’s linguistic ‘framing’ disrupts the narrative flow of the ‘accompanying’ octave:

Yet now the disclosure:

Madame Renou! While the mind

toys with the title, the

rest of me has no time

for the spouse. Art like

this could have left her tagged surname out.

The wistful generalisation of the opening stanza (‘Could I have loved this? [...] It is not the observer/ she pouts at, but life itself’) is recalibrated (or ‘redrawn’) via the particularity of the painting’s *name*. This is not a representation of contemplative, virginal naiveté, but a portrait of a mature woman imprisoned, at least in Thomas’s imagination, in a presumably acrimonious marriage. The categorical pronouncement of painting as aesthetic production (‘Art *like*/ this’) and the multi-punning ‘tagged’ in the final sentence—‘art should be isolated from the grubbiness of the world’/ ‘*this* painting should have been left to “speak for itself”’—suggest that spatial portrayal can only be expressed in terms of textual elucidation.<sup>77</sup> Temporality here really *is* the originator of perceptual/ spatial valuation. The lovelorn pensiveness of the sestet and its interruption by the verbal concreteness and decidedly non-amorous tenor of the octave remodels our *initial* ‘reading’ of the sitter’s look as one of gullibility, into an *alternative* look of supercilious disparagement. In addition, the supposed ‘rigidity’ of Derain’s canvas is further unbalanced by narrative pressure. The octave overrides the ‘stillness’ of the picture and locates

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<sup>77</sup> Of course, with the appellation ‘tagged’ there is the further, non-metaphorical denotation, pertaining not just to the picture’s title, but the catalogue descriptions, curatorial notes and so forth, required to ‘properly’ present the canvas.

the figure within a personalized and historically-specific situation. Through this iconotext, perhaps more than any other within the collection, both Thomas's and the viewer-reader's comprehension of the painting oscillates between the 'iconophilia' and 'iconophobia' determined by Heffernan as an inevitable consequence of the ekphrastic mode. In any act of ekphrasis, it is *textual* undermining of pictorial inertia which provokes the interpretative impulse.

Despite 'art's *claim* to be still life' ('Still-life: Carl Hofer', *IT*, 18, my emphasis), ekphrasis's insertion of narrative, context and subjectivity into pictorial or spatial appreciation, refashions the spatial object itself. Therefore, ekphrasis ultimately refashions our creative and interpretative responses to whatever is visually depicted.<sup>78</sup> In 'The Meeting: Gustav de Smet' (*IT*, 25), a poem worth quoting in full, the substitution of ekphrastic 'mimesis' with 'diegesis' is stated unequivocally:

'How dare you?

As though I can't keep

to my own skirts

without being accosted.'

'But I said nothing.'

'You are using my edges

to look over. Digging should

mean: eyes on the ground.'

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<sup>78</sup> In this context it is worth quoting Richard Stamelman on John Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror", a long meditation on a picture of that name by Francesco Parmigianino. Ashbery's poem, says Stamelman, 'is a radical criticism of the illusions and deceptions inherent in traditional forms of representation that insist on the ideal, essential, and totalized nature of the copied images they portray'. 'Critical Reflections: Poetry and Art Criticism in Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"', in *New Literary History* 15 (1984), 607-30. Cited in Heffernan, 177.



I translate the encounter.  
 But the flag at attention  
 at the house corner prefers  
 the original: Vive la France.

We should not allow the apparent whimsicality of the poem to eclipse its broader thematic significance. Thomas in this text directly confronts the ekphrastic compulsion ('I *translate* the encounter') by calling attention to a diegetically- (and dialogically) adjusted reinterpretation of the icon. Within the 'diptych' of the iconotext, of course, the 'original' painting does not in actual fact exist at all; as Mitchell remarks, the '*interarticulation* of perceptual, semiotic, and social contradictions' *is* ekphrasis.<sup>79</sup> The poem 'redraws' its visual complement by generating symbiotic tension between text and icon. This iconotext, like several others previously discussed, seems to posit that although there is no static or factually demonstrable hermeneutical code submerged within the picture and waiting to be unlocked by ekphrastic representation, the text nevertheless infuses the icon and in so doing *provides* it with representative significance. Krieger, commenting on Rosalie Colie's view in her *Paradoxia Epidemica* that 'all pictures demonstrate, not just the weakness and deceits of our senses, but also the relative meaninglessness of things',<sup>80</sup> argues that representative self-reflexivity entails ontological as well as aesthetic considerations:

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<sup>79</sup> *Picture Theory*, 180. My emphasis. Cf. Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), 101: 'Writing cannot represent the visible, but it can desire and, in a manner of speaking, move towards the visible without actually achieving the unambiguous directness of an object seen before one's eyes'. Cited in Louvel, 90.

<sup>80</sup> *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox* (Princeton: P. U. P., 1966), 298.

When she transfers her insights to the verbal arts, Colie focuses upon the use of mirrors or mirrorlike elements first in drama, then also in other literary genres, particularly the lyric. In all of these she finds a similar and insistent reflexivity, which is to remind us of the make-believe illusion that is both art and art's reflection of an equally illusionary world. Her interpretive method traces the circularity—indeed, celebrates the vortical principle—of works that continually turn back on themselves, confessing themselves only art and not the actual things. But the method has from the outset been thematized in the metaphysical and moral implications of her appeal to illusion, which ends by suggesting a justification for art. It suggests that all worldly existence is to be seen as *delusion*, leading us astray, *except* for the conscious self-referentiality of the work of art: the work's confession that it is *i*llusion [...] reveals itself to us as a self-conscious version of delusion that can serve as our metaphysical beacon through these shadows and snares. In reminding us of its own status as illusion, as soothsayer of our universe, the work of art may be the only thing we can trust, even as it self-consciously retreats before itself.<sup>81</sup>

By 'making strange', argues Krieger, we endow our perceptions with greater intensity and exactitude, and by 'destabilizing' the spatial/ temporal relationship, we stabilize our understanding of visual and textual architectonics. Ekphrasis is not epiphenomenal—it does not suffuse pictorial representation with the 'flattering blandishments of epideictic rhetoric' as

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<sup>81</sup> *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*, 211-2. Emphases in original. Krieger notes that Colie is especially interested in van Eyck's painting of Arnolfini and his wife, as well as Velasquez's *Las Meniñas*, two pictures in which the viewer's perspective is both generated and challenged by reflection. As Katie Gramich has demonstrated in the paper previously cited, Thomas often employs 'mirror' tropes to foreground the simultaneous apprehension *and* evasion of selfhood.

Mitchell glosses Lessing's view<sup>82</sup>—but discloses the fundamental truth that *every* aesthetic medium is unavoidably heterogeneous, pluriform, and semiotically variegated.<sup>83</sup>

Emphasis on the complex, underlying semioticism of both pictorial and literary representation forms the thematic lodestar of many poems within *Ingrowing Thoughts*, and is especially detectable in those poems within the latter half of the book. The first of the Giorgio di Chirico iconotexts, 'The Child's Brain' (*IT*, 29), for instance, challenges us to view textual depiction as intellectually exacting: 'The book is as closed/ as the mind contemplating/ it [...] you open/ either of them at your own risk'. The chiaroscuro-referenced closing image of the second di Chirico iconotext, 'The Oracle' (*IT*, 30), foregrounds the need to see dichotomy and semiotic multifariousness themselves as the *solution* to conceptual disorientation:

So mathematicians  
should appear in surrealist  
mourning, shaven-headed  
to reveal the skull  
half in darkness, half in light  
in permanent procrastination  
of the eclipse of thought.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>83</sup> It is worth mentioning that there is nothing new in attaching the study of literature to that of art and art history. As Donald Preziosi points out, 'one of the earliest formal appearances of art history in the American university system occurred in 1874 when the Harvard Corporation appointed Charles Eliot Norton Lecturer on the History of the Fine Arts as Connected with Literature'. *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale U. P., 1989), 9. Cited in Mitchell, 85.

<sup>84</sup> The metaphor in the final line of the poem implies that the *temporary* obscuration of truth (the 'eclipse')—which we can take to mean an understanding of 'contradiction' *as* meaning—will reveal truth with greater exactitude than a more 'unquestioning' approach. Such an interpretation of the poem would obviously connect with the general dialectic, as suggested in the previous chapter, of apophasis and cataphasis as interdependent forms of predication rather than 'self-governing' terms of reference.

Withdrawal of apodictic certainty and the attendant foregrounding of ekphrasis as non-voicing serves as the interpretative crux of the previously discussed ‘The Red Model: René Magritte’: ‘I *construct*/ the body’. A similar concern is also noticeable in ‘Encounter in the Afternoon: Paul Nash’ (*IT*, 34). In this poem Thomas’s metaphors of fluidity and narrative movement displace the impersonal, linear firmness of Nash’s composition and, in so doing, fashion an iconotext of unexpected and curious poignancy:

The supine and the erect  
                   in an imaginary  
 landscape: the sea the colour  
 of their shadows.

                  What each  
 would say to the other  
                   in identity’s  
 absence is: Hush, thing,  
 the horizons are upon us.

The second stanza accords speech and personality to Nash’s geometric figures, Thomas imbuing the picture with specifically existential nuances. The double-edged *prosopopoeia* (‘What each/ *would* say’) both envoices *and* suppresses the icon. The conditional verb provides first a narrativized contextualisation for the viewer-reader’s gaze, and secondly underscores the non-mimetic tenor of the poet’s ekphrastic response. Again, the text represents or ‘speaks to’, and simultaneously disrupts and recalibrates, the supposed motionless of the icon. Thomas converts the picture into a wholly imaginary episode, thus demonstrates again the referential ‘indefiniteness’ of pictorial representation. Narrative impulse is emancipated rather than

contained by the visuality of the icon. In Heffernan's lucid gloss, the poetic or temporal depiction of the spatial is, 'dynamic and obstetric, delivering from the pregnant moment of visual art the extended narrative which it embryonically signifies'.<sup>85</sup>

As I have argued, from the very beginning of his poetic career Thomas seems exceptionally interested in perception as *function* and the ways in which what we 'see' is dependent on what we bring to the very *practice* of seeing. Obviously, the hypothesis of perception as 'seeing as'—that is, perception's subjective and provisional nature—entails the further, explicitly metaphysical hypothesis, that 'reality' is as much a human construct as either pictorial or linguistic representation. According to Heffernan, this is in contradistinction to the Renaissance artist's view of perception. The Renaissance painter, says Heffernan, 'essentially adopted the Protagorean principle that man is the measure of all things; [in the Renaissance period] the capacity to represent what we *see* became virtually identical with the capacity to represent what *is*; to capture the way things "really" looked was to capture the way they really were'.<sup>86</sup>

The ekphrastic objective of *suppressing* denotation, releasing signification and *suspending* meaning is discernible in the volume's two final iconotexts, 'Captain Cook's Last Voyage: Roland Penrose' (*IT*, 46) and 'Drawing by a Child: Diana Brinton Lee' (*IT*, 49). In his non-voicing of the Roland Penrose piece—the only example of sculpture in the two ekphrastic collections—Thomas once more eschews the Vasarian tenet that 'description' of a work of art is primarily a form of apostrophe. With this iconotext, Thomas's 'poetry of art'—a suggestively polysemous phrase—expresses both the poetic effect that art may produce on a viewer, and the way in which the semioticism or 'textuality' of art, may elicit poetry *from* the viewer. The poem, generated throughout by means of nimbly-wrought nautical metaphors, inverts the supposed finality of the sculpture's *title* (Cook, of course, being killed in Hawaii)

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<sup>85</sup> *Museum of Words*, 113.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

to foreground the evolutionary and ‘indefinite’ nature of spiritual, as opposed to physical, exploration and discovery. The opening triplet cleaves the ‘inertness’ of the sculpture to the corresponding notion of aesthetic beauty as immutable. The ensuing quintain, however, annuls this atmosphere of immobility through its obverse diction of commencement and inauguration:

He has thrown the globe  
 about her and set forth  
 on his maiden voyage  
 to the flesh that is the iceberg  
                   on which we are wrecked.

The *re*interpretation of Penrose’s title—with the obvious pun on ‘maiden’ rescinding our initial understanding of the piece as in some way evoking the ‘completeness’, as it were, of Cook’s life—carries us into the final stanza’s uncompromising assertion that ‘time’s cage’ (a characteristically Thomasian compound) will dissolve the need for destination and purpose:

                  we are becalmed  
 listening to the echoes  
 in the nerves’ rigging  
                   of that far-off storm  
 that is spirit blowing itself  
 out in the emptiness at the Poles.

The principal theme of the poem is the importance of acknowledging mortality and impermanence, a theme further suggested by the noun ‘spirit’, whose etymology signifies

‘breath’ and ‘breathing’. Yet it is important to recognize that the poem is also concerned with the wider theme of ekphrastic representation as non-verisimilitude, or what I have termed ‘prosopopoeial non-voicing’. Thomas’s text does not so much verbalize Penrose’s sculpture as disclose the relationships of symmetry and dissymmetry, transgression and antithesis, *necessarily* embedded within the ekphrastic mode.<sup>87</sup> The act of iconophilic ‘homage’ traditionally associated with ekphrasis should really be understood as a method of critique. The text challenges the ‘denotative’ veracity of the work of art and thereby both affirms and denies its aesthetic status.

‘Drawing by a Child: Diana Brinton Lee’, the concluding iconotext in *Ingrowing Thoughts*, reiterates the volume’s general dialectic of *dislocation* between word and image, voicing and non-voicing, metaphor and literality. The poem, redolent of the much earlier ‘Children’s Song’ (*SYT*, 97), is a kind of requiem for existential loss. Thomas converts the representations in the picture into a narrative of conflict and acrimony:

All of them, Mummy and Daddy  
 in their various disguises—  
     it is my revenge on them  
     for bringing me to be. [...]

And horns, horns for everything  
     in my nursery, pointing to the

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<sup>87</sup> Louvel, discussing Krieger’s model of ekphrasis as an amalgamation of ‘viewer→ object (work of art)→ creator’, points out that this idea is similar to Abrams famous model of critical receptivity in *The Mirror and the Lamp* of ‘artist→ universe/ work→ audience’. Louvel also makes the point that Krieger’s model shares certain features with Jakobson’s structuralist prototype of ‘addresser→ context/ message/ contact/ code→ addressee’. Ekphrasis, says Louvel, is essentially a model of the various factors necessary for verbal communication, as it ‘combines the referential function and the conative function, which also appears in classical descriptive modes, such as prosopopoeia which gives voice to the absent’. *Poetics of the Iconotext*, 47.

cuckold I know my father to be.

Reversing once more the spatial/ temporal dialectic, the text creates a narrativized thematizing of its ostensible subject. The snappy interchanges between juvenile and more sophisticated phraseology—‘And, oh, yes! The toys/ who play with me’/ ‘indices of the underworld’; ‘Can you imagine how a doll snarls? With/ what relish a kitten converts// its tail into a serpent?’—and the anchoring of main clauses by predicates of making (‘bringing me’/ ‘giving them’/ ‘pointing to’), suggest the capacity of language to interrupt and reconfigure the supposed inertia of pictorial representation. There is a sort of synaesthetic transference from icon to text and back again. The viewer-reader, through the narrative-grounded exits and entrances constructed by the text, is compelled into interpreting the icon as more of a ‘temporalized’ than purely spatial artefact. The valence between poem and painting is inverted or, at least, significantly transformed. The viewer-reader is therefore coerced into the role of ‘synthesizer’, rather than mere ‘observer’ or ‘tabulator’, of the pictorial and textual constituents of the composition.

In Thomas’s two volumes of ekphrastic poetry, then, we can certainly argue that a central thematic intention is to foreground the iconotextual mechanisms of the ekphrastic mode itself. This is not to say, of course, that other themes are not clearly discernible. There is, for example, a sharp emphasis in several of the iconotexts on gender and sexuality, as Davies and others have shown. Nevertheless, it does seem to be the case that many poems within both collections articulate a specific understanding of text and icon. In particular, Thomas’s iconotexts appear to suggest a particular method of interpretation. They seem to promote a kind of variation of the ‘triangular relationship’ of ‘object-poet-viewer/reader’ dialectic which Mitchell advances as the definitive characteristic of ekphrastic representation:



The ekphrastic poet typically stands in a middle position between the object described or addressed and a listening subject who [...] will be made to “see” the object through the medium of the poet’s voice. Ekphrasis is stationed between two “othernesses”, and two forms of (apparently) impossible translation and exchange: (1) the conversion of the visual representation into a verbal representation, either by description or ventriloquism; (2) the reconversion of the verbal representation back into the visual object in the reception of the reader.<sup>88</sup>

Continuing his phenomenological account of the ekphrastic impulse, Mitchell argues that what he terms ‘ekphrastic hope and fear’—meaning our *desire* to find sameness and our *intellectual* recognition that sameness is impossible—ultimately convey ‘our anxieties about merging with others’.<sup>89</sup> Thus, the ‘othernesses’ which ekphrasis attempts to verbalize, point to the impossibility of uncovering a ‘transcendental signified’.<sup>90</sup> Such a reading, stressing as it does the genre’s metaphysical elements, could also of course be applied to some of Thomas’ ekphrases. For example, it is perfectly feasible to contend that ekphrases (or iconotexts) such as ‘Gauguin: The Alysamps at Arles’, ‘Monet: Rouen Cathedral, Full Sunshine’ and ‘L’Abbaye de Chartre: André Bauchant’ (*IT*, 21), show the impossibility of selfhood merging with divinity, and, if that is true, then we should really interpret them as foregrounding the ‘*Deus absconditus*’ motif. As I have maintained, however, ekphrasis may also be construed as a *linguistic* rather than a ‘metaphysical’ practice. It can be argued that Thomas in these poems is stressing not the impossibility of ‘merging with others’, but how this *apparent* impossibility can become possible through increased awareness of how our language and, in particular, our

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<sup>88</sup> *Picture Theory*, 164.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

taxonomies, actually function. It is in this sense of the ekphrastic compulsion as necessitating self-reflective praxis, I think, that the iconotexts of *Between Here and Now* and *Ingrowing Thoughts* should best be approached. Thomas, by refusing to pursue the holy grail of an ekphrastic *punctum temporis*, is able to simultaneously ventriloquize *and* silence the accompanying image. The poems not so much ‘speak’ the paintings, as articulate the underlying semioticism of *both* temporal and spatial portrayal. Through textual suppression of the painting’s ‘voice’ and the replacement of pictorial stasis with temporalized and thus narrativized depiction, many of the poems seem to posit that all art is ultimately *symbiosis* of self-reflexivity and self-performativity. As opposed to the more ‘monolithic’ understanding of ekphrasis as that which verbalizes painting’s ‘objective’ reality, *Between Here and Now* and *Ingrowing Thoughts* show that observation, representation and description, are categorical *and* subjective experiences. Every iconotext both asserts *and* repudiates its denotative capacity. In addition, by attacking the canonical understanding of ekphrasis as essentially a form of imaginative envoicing, Thomas is also revealing the ways in which the ‘being’ of the objects we describe is not something peripheral to language, but the very consequence of those self-same descriptions. If it is correct to characterize ekphrasis as a form of *representation*, then iconotexts create new and *altered* realities rather than merely ‘exhibit’, or ‘add something to’, an original artwork. Ekphrasis is therefore not so much concerned with the depiction of a specific canvas or piece of plastic art, but depicts the perceptual and conceptual foundations of ‘depiction’ itself. Consequently, ekphrasis *necessarily* reveals the intellectual presuppositions embedded within the very *concept* of ‘verisimilitude’.

The two ekphrastic volumes, therefore, may be seen as further evidence of Thomas’s fascination with the dynamics of perception and the various ways in which the viewer himself ‘creates’ the objects he perceives. There is no such thing as ‘objective’ perception; if one wishes to perceive anything with any degree of precision, then it is essential that one is cognizant of

the intellectual, cultural and emotional *preconceptions* one brings to one's act of perceiving. Through the strategy of 'non-voicing' Thomas disturbs visual art's narrative current and, by extension, he is able to foreground the *ambiguity* embedded within the perceptual act. Ekphrastic 'non-voicing', in other words, serves the purpose of 'stripping away' preconceptions and thus 'forces' the reader-viewer of the iconotext to challenge his understanding of perception and therefore of thought itself. Thomas's ekphrases, because they are effectively verbal enactments of *non-verbalization*, compel us to first confront, and secondly *renew*, our understanding of what perception and verbalization actually *are*. In Thomas's ekphrases, nothing is stable or predictable: the poet asks us to 'see beneath' the ostensible stasis of the canvas and recognise its *fluctuating* denotations. Thus, if the thematic intention of the ekphrastic poems, at least in part, is to challenge perceptual *inattentiveness*, then these poems may be used to initiate a critical context within which to explore the great theological poetry of Thomas's final years. In these later poems the target often seems to be intellectual *imprecision* with regard to theological understanding, and it is to an examination of this theme within Thomas's verse that we shall now turn.

## Chapter Five

### ‘Apostrophising/ the deity’: God and Gød — Idolatry/ Onto-theology/ Theo-logy in

#### *Destinations (1985) and Experimenting with an Amen (1986)*

When a philosophical thought expresses a concept of what it then names ‘God’, this concept functions exactly as an idol. It gives itself to be seen, but thus all the better conceals itself as the mirror where thought, invisibly, has its forward point fixed, so that the *invisible* finds itself, with an aim suspended by the fixed concept, disqualified and abandoned; thought freezes, and the idolatrous concept of ‘God’ appears, where, more than God, thought judges itself.<sup>1</sup>

No one gives God his Name, but rather it is God who delivers it. That deliverance of the Name by the unthinkable, which reveals itself therein as unthinkable, gives to the requirement of thinking the divine things divinely its ultimate exigency. One must think them according to God. This means leaving to God, the unthinkable, the care of delivering them. The unthinkable gives itself to be thought as unthinkable. The name does not result from a predication that, in transit over the border of the unthinkable, we would effect from the thinkable to the unthinkable, like an arrow that, hurled against the sun, manages miraculously and stupidly to arrive there. The Name comes to us as unthinkable within the thinkable, because the unthinkable in person delivers it to us, just as a perfect, unknown, and anonymous poem reveals all of the poet and conceals

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: U. C. P., 1991), 16. ‘Invisible’ is a term coined by Marion. It signifies that which cannot be targeted or perceived.

him infinitely.<sup>2</sup>

In previous chapters it was argued that a hermeneutical paradigm may be of use when interpreting Thomas's poetry. In particular, I maintained that one may approach the poetry through what Richard Rorty has termed the 'linguistic turn' in contemporary thought; that is, we can read many of Thomas's poems as foregrounding 'non-ontological' thinking. It was also maintained that the 'pictorial turn' in regard to ekphrastic verse—*ut poesis pictura* rather than *ut pictura poesis*—can provide us with a way of connecting Thomas's ekphrases to his interest in deific 'speechleesness'.

In this chapter, I would like to suggest another 'turn' through which Thomas's religious poetry in his final collections of verse may be apprehended: the further 'replacement' of a metaphysical interpretation of divinity by means of the phenomenological or 'theological turn' in contemporary thought.<sup>3</sup> To this end, I propose to refer at some length to the work of the contemporary French theologian Jean-Luc Marion and, in particular, his influential contention that the study of 'divinity' is not really the investigation of anything 'ontological' at all. Marion argues that in order to 'analyse' divinity we must firstly analyse the phenomenology of theological language and, especially, theological language as explored and articulated through the Dionysian tradition. Similarly, Thomas, I will argue, is endeavouring to show that a workable symbiosis of the 'possibility' and 'impossibility' of divinity is certainly achievable, *if* one firstly understands the nature of religious language. Thomas is demonstrating that, just

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York: Fordham U. P., 2001), 142-3.

<sup>3</sup> We could additionally maintain that Derridean deconstruction *itself* is a consequence of what John D. Caputo has termed the 'religious turn' in French phenomenology. See 'The Hyperbolization of Phenomenology: Two Possibilities for Religion in Recent Continental Philosophy', in *Counter-Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, ed. Kevin Hart (Indiana: U. Notre Dame P., 2007), 70-6. By the 'religious turn' in deconstruction, Caputo means, 'that God is the name of what we desire, which is how it [the name] functions in Derrida [...] deconstruction is structured as a desire beyond desire, as a desire for God, a *cor inquietum*, a restless heart that desires we do not know quite what, where the name of God is the name of our desire even as it is the best name we have for what we do not know'. 74.

as deific ‘silence’ is not commensurate with ‘absence’—which, as was argued in chapter three, appears to constitute the principal religious theme in many of the Aberdaron and post-1978 poems—‘God’, however we may wish to conceptualize the term, is not the capstone of metaphysics *correctly* understood. On the contrary, Thomas is contending that ‘religion’ and ‘divinity’ must be approached through their hermeneutical—as opposed to ontological—implications, consequences and denotations. Thomas as religious thinker, like Marion himself according to Thomas A. Carlson, ought really to be recognized as a kind of non-Marxian ‘liberation theologian’:

Marion writes one of the most challenging of liberation theologies— one that seeks primarily [...] to free *God* from the alienation in which he would have been placed by the reign of the human sciences [...] The defining gesture of metaphysics, in its conception of human subject and God alike, is to establish *a priori* grounds or reasons according to which alone anything, including God, might appear and thus to place the reasons for appearance somewhere outside, beyond, or behind that appearance itself—thereby yielding only an “alienated phenomenality” and thereby impeding the appearance and reception of any revelation worthy of the name.<sup>4</sup>

The post-metaphysical conceptualization of divinity as observable in the poetry written in Thomas’s final years, is a furtherance of his earlier arguments against the futilely anthropomorphic diminution of divinity. It is in this sense of theological questioning as providing *deliverance* from the anthropomorphic compulsion that Thomas’s understanding of God as ‘presence/ *without* existence’ (*ERS*, 33, my emphasis)—a palpably Marion-like epithet,

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Blindness and the Decision to See: On Revelation and Reception in Jean-Luc Marion’, in *Counter-Experiences*, 153-4.

given the title ‘God Without Being’—and his self-confessed ‘obsession *with* nothing’ (*ERS*, 49, my emphasis) must be interpreted and understood.

Marion’s theology is complicated and, due to restrictions of space, I intend to confine my emphasis to what David Tracy has called Marion’s ‘second stage’, that is, his two important books from 1977 and 1982 respectively: *L’idole et la distance* (*The Idol and Distance*) and *Dieu sans l’être: Hors-texte* (*God Without Being*).<sup>5</sup> Both these texts—still, perhaps, the best known of his oeuvre—offer Marion’s analysis of ‘idolatry’ and ‘iconography’ and, especially in the former text, his phenomenological and hermeneutical critique of both apophatic and cataphatic predication. These two forms of theological predication, maintains Marion, *inescapably* necessitate ‘idolatrous [i.e. ‘blasphemous’] naïveté’, for negation, accurately comprehended,

imagines itself only to invert the predication concerning a given object. In this case, the object is emptied little by little. But negativity *remains as vain as positivity*. For it does not reach that which it alone might have allowed one to glimpse: a beyond of the two truth values of categorical predication [...] Negation clears away and highlights a silhouette, far from opening onto a void. As sculpture frees from the brute and visible material that which renders invisible the invisible thing to be seen—the form itself—such that the stone no longer masks what it contains, “we deny and remove every thing in order to know without concealment that unknowing, which is concealed by all the knowledge that knows beings”. To know the unknowing that our knowledges conceal does not amount to ignoring or to foundering in the emptiness of the thing as some kind of knowing. It is much rather a matter of using denegation

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<sup>5</sup> See Tracy’s, ‘Jean-Luc Marion: Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, Theology’, in *Counter-Experiences*, 60.

in order to all the better know— without any idea. This (un-) knowing is opposed to the idolatry of categorical predication, because in it the negative way encounters, in “ascending”, the names that, precisely, the affirmative way, in “descending”, managed to pronounce. Negation and affirmation bear upon *the same attributes*, only envisaged from two points of view.<sup>6</sup>

Analogous to the *via positiva*, the *via negativa*—the taproot, in other words, of Thomas’s theological position according to many scholars as we saw in chapter one—occasions ‘idolatrous’ and thus self-refuting theological discourses. The *via negativa* does not ‘free’ divinity from predication but rather ‘subsumes’ it within an intellectually-preordained and ontologically-hardened predicative substructure.<sup>7</sup> To put it another way, the refutation of cataphasis by means of apophatic predication still leads to ‘a second-level idolatry: anthropomorphist critique [because] At a certain point within the negative ascent, apophasis rediscovers the intelligible names that kataphasis affirmed’.<sup>8</sup> Thus, according to Marion’s reading of pseudo-Dionysius, ‘apophasis’ is merely another signifier for the projection of man’s idolatrous *conceptualizations* of divinity. The ‘non-predicative’ existentials of the *via negativa* contain at their semantic nucleus the very affirmations which they were purposefully envisaged to repudiate.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *The Idol and Distance*, 147-8. My emphases. The embedded quotation is from pseudo-Dionysius’s *Mystical Theology*.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Marion’s *Etant donné: Essai d’une phénoménologie de la donation* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), 340: ‘The paradox of paradoxes does not have to choose between kataphasis and apophasis any more than between the saturation and the poverty of intuition—it uses them all in order to push to its limits the phenomenality of that which shows itself only inasmuch as it gives itself’. Cited in Carlson’s Introduction to *The Idol and Distance*, xxiii-xxiv, n.19. Carlson has analysed what he perceives as differences between Marion’s and Derrida’s understanding of the apophatic/ cataphatic distinction. See his *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: U. C. P., 1999), chapter 6, ‘The Naming of God and the Possibility of Impossibility: Marion and Derrida between the Theology and the Phenomenology of the Gift’.

<sup>8</sup> *The Idol and Distance*, 146.

<sup>9</sup> In a similar sense to Marion, J. M. Cocking also sees an argument against *both* apophatic and cataphatic ‘idolatry’ in the writings of pseudo-Dionysius: ‘The Symbolic Theology of Dionysius ascends to God as *epistrophe* or Final Cause through sensible and intelligible symbols; for the sensible world, to the enlightened mind, is impregnated with *logoi* and thus becomes a world of symbols. The Symbolic Theology discards the materiality of the symbol in order to being out its significance. Every affirmation must be balanced by a negation



Using the work of Derrida and Jean-Louis Chrétien as exegetical templates the representation of the *via negativa* and the *via positiva* in Thomas's poetry has been discussed at some length in chapter three. Consequently, although it is undoubtedly the case that in his final collections Thomas often engages the problematical question of *how* theological semantics actually operate, I do not wish to dwell on those poems which seem to refer once more to the erroneous binarism of the apophatic/ cataphatic distinction.<sup>10</sup> Rather, I will argue that the most noticeable theme in the later religious poems is a jettisoning of *onto*-theology and the embracement of what Marion terms *theo*-logy: metaphysical (and thus *anthropomorphic*) explanations of God must be jettisoned all together and replaced with a type of theological thinking which identifies the futility of theological metaphysics. Marion, quoting Pascal's '[only] God can speak well of God', contends that instead of struggling to locate sustainable signifiers for 'God', we should recognize the ways in which *ontological* conceptions of divinity stimulate religious confusion.<sup>11</sup> As Marion writes in his Preface to the English edition of *God Without Being*, names for God become 'metaphysical functions of "God" and hide that much more the mystery of God as such'.<sup>12</sup> Whenever we attempt to understand God through, and with, a metaphysical paradigm—such as the God of 'Being' in Aquinas and even Heidegger, according to Marion, or the God of 'infinity' (Malebranche/ Spinoza), or the God of 'substance'

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and vice versa. God is 'king' and 'Lord', but the anthropomorphic elements must be denied— God is not these as we know them. Every affirmation of the divine can only be a metaphor; but only by metaphors can we affirm [...] Idolatry comes from the failure to negate the materiality of the symbol in favour of its spiritual meaning; the symbol is then worshipped in itself'. *Imagination: A Study in the History of Ideas* (London: Routledge, 1991), 86-7. Comparable repudiations of *via negativa/ via positiva* binarism seem to lie at the heart of much of Thomas's religious poetry.

<sup>10</sup> For example: 'Calling' (EA, 31); 'A Thicket in Llyn' (EA, 45); 'Andante' (EA, 61); 'Revision' (EA, 69); 'The wrong prayers for the right/ reason?' (ERS, 45); 'A congregation at prayer' (ERS, 55); 'Revision was in the air' (ERS, 96); 'Conversation, soliloquy' (ERS, 115)—worth quoting in full because of its implicitly 'Dionysian' diction: 'Conversation, soliloquy,/ silence—a descending or an ascending scale? That you are there/ to be found, the disciplines// agree. Anonymous presence/ grant that, when I come/ questioning, it is not with the dictionary/ in one hand, the microscope in the other'.—'No, in the beginning was silence' (C, 9); 'This at the bottom/ of the ladder' (C, 14); 'Silent, Lord,' (C, 39); 'The way the tree's boughs' (C, 43); 'You show me two faces' (C, 53); 'Beauty is ill' (C, 58); 'Mass for Hard Times: Credo' (MHT, 12-13); 'One Day' (MHT, 19); 'Tell Us' (MHT, 46); 'The Letter' (MHT, 77); 'Heretics' (NTF, 29); 'Mischief' (NTF, 45); 'Neither' (NTF, 58); 'Homage to Wallace Stevens' (NTF, 62); 'Silence' (NTF, 83).

<sup>11</sup> Pascal, *Pensées*. Cited in *God Without Being*, 223, n. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *God Without Being*, xxi.

(Descartes), or the God of ‘reason’ (Kant), or the God of ‘morality’ (Nietzsche)—we unintentionally create for ourselves epistemic astigmatism. Ontological conceptualizations such as these distort, rather than clarify, our theological imagination and vision.<sup>13</sup> We inaugurate, in other words, an ‘idolatrous’ (mis)understanding of deific attributes, and ‘idolatry’, in Marion’s theological system, is exactly that which misrepresents what is truly there:

The idol presents itself to man’s gaze in order that representation, and hence knowledge, can seize hold of it. The idol is erected there only so that one can see it: the monumental statue of Athena shone from the Acropolis to the gaze of the sailors of the Piraeus, and if the darkness of a *naos* shaded the chryselephantine statue, it followed that in order to divine it, the worshipper experienced that much more of its fascination when, approaching, he could finally lift his eyes to it. The idol fascinates and captivates the gaze precisely because everything in it must expose itself to the gaze, attract, fill and hold it.<sup>14</sup>

An understanding of onto-theology pinpointing the ‘negation’ of ontology itself may seem mere atheistic reductionism—if no predicate can be applied to God then does it not logically follow that ‘God’ is an empty signifier?—but this would be to overlook the dominant thrust of Marion’s careful and subtle argument. Since ‘no man can see God and live’ (Exodus 33: 20) and since, conceptually as well as etymologically, an ‘idol’ (from *eidolon* or

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<sup>13</sup> Marion holds that even the most famous theological ‘proof’ of all, St. Anselm of Canterbury’s Ontological Argument as explicated in the *Proslogion*, is not, in point of fact, ‘ontological’ in any significant sense of the term. The argument’s initial premise that God is the ‘Highest Being’, condenses God into a ‘concept’ and therefore an ‘idol’, and Marion maintains that Anselm was far too acute a thinker not to have been aware of this. Anselm, continues Marion, is not arguing for a ‘God’ of metaphysics at all but is really engaged in a type of ‘negative theology’. See Marion’s, ‘Is the Ontological Argument Ontological?: The Argument According to Anselm and Its Metaphysical Interpretation According to Kant’, in *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology* ed. Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate (New York: Fordham U., P., 2000), 78-99.

<sup>14</sup> *God Without Being*, 9-10.

‘appearance’) is a *visual* paradigm, it follows that any attempt to understand God by means of metaphysical delineation (Aquinean, Nietzschean, Heideggerean and so on) is, quite literally, a profane and irreverent exercise in the construction of ‘graven imagery’.<sup>15</sup> The metaphysical idol does not allow us to ‘see through’ it towards the truth but, on the contrary, enraptures and hypnotizes our gaze. It encompasses the divine, as it were, within the measure of a purely *human* glance. Our propensity towards idol-isation, therefore, is precisely that which lodges the beam in our own eye, for in desiring to make the invisible ‘visible’ by means of ontological categorization, we deny the invisible its compulsory invisibility. Hence, we fail to perceive that which invisibility actually *reveals*. As Marion says in a series of important passages concerning the essential ‘temperament’ of idolatrous religious worship:

Man becomes religious by preparing a face for the divine: he takes it upon himself to fashion the face, and then to ask the divine to invest it, as radically as possible, so as to become his god [...] The idol must fix the distant and diffuse divinity and assure us of its presence, of its power, of its availability. Just as our experience precedes from the face of the divine, so our vital interest precedes from it: the idol fixes the divine for us permanently, for a commerce where the human hems in the divine from all angles. What is peculiar to the idol, therefore, has to do with this: the divine is fixed in it on the basis of the experience of the

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<sup>15</sup> Man’s ‘idolatrous’ construal of God is of course a major theme in many Old Testament texts. See for example: Leviticus 19: 4; Leviticus 26: 1; Deuteronomy 4: 16; Deuteronomy 5: 8; 2 Kings 17: 12; Psalms 78: 58; Ezekiel 20: 7. In a clever argumentative gambit, Marion insists that atheism also is ‘idolatrous’ because it too, like any ‘theism’ which progresses from metaphysics, ‘is only ever valid as far as the concept of ‘God’ that it mobilizes extends. For the demonstration that refutes ‘God’ demands from him one last service: to furnish the object that supports and nourishes the refutation. If, then, ‘God’ covers a particular semantic terrain, the refutation will not eliminate God absolutely but only the meaning of God that its initial ‘God’ offers to be disputed’. *The Idol and Distance*, 2. This argument could obviously be employed to rebuff those critical assessments —propounded most noticeably, perhaps, by John Barnie—which endeavour to establish that Thomas was in effect an atheist himself. So prevalent and influential have such ‘non-theistic’ views of Thomas’s religious poetry been, that as late as 2005 Thomas Day could publish a review of *Collected Later Poems, 1988-2000* and *Echoes to the Amen* in *The Cambridge Quarterly* (34.2) 184-8 entitled ‘Doubting Thomas’.

divine that is had by man, who, by relying on the idol's mediation, attempts to attract the benevolence and the protection of what appears in it as a god [...] The idol therefore delivers us the divine, wherefore it neither deceives nor disappoints. It delivers the divine to us to the point of enslaving it to us, just as much as it enslaves us to it. The contract that the idol draws up subsidizes the absence of the gods.<sup>16</sup>

The idol, therefore, interprets the divine as a sort of 'prey to be captured' (Philippians 2: 6). It does not *welcome* absence and withdrawal—pivotal themes in both *The Idol and Distance* and *God Without Being* and themes to which subsequent reference shall be made—but attempts to circumvent separateness through the anthropomorphic/ metaphysical 'annexation' of divinity. We 'fashion' God in *our* image and likeness instead of recognising that the divine-human relationship must necessarily work the other way about; thus, God ceases to *be* God and becomes instead a mere tattered projection of our inadequate understanding of deific 'characteristics'.

In *Destinations*, the 'neglected mainspring of [...] philosophical turning towards affirmation in R. S. Thomas' according to Christopher Morgan, there are several poems which appear to contain at their thematic centre a comparable emphasis on what the 'idolatrous' misinterpretation of divinity actually occasions.<sup>17</sup> The opening poem of the book, 'The Message' (*D*, 7), employs the extended metaphor of a bird 'bearing' a despatch from God,

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<sup>16</sup>*The Idol and Distance*, 5-6.

<sup>17</sup> *R. S. Thomas: Identity, Environment, and Deity*, 188. By the time of *Destinations*, continues Morgan, 'Thomas seems [...] to have evolved spiritually out of unfathomable space and the predominating experience of absence, not towards contentment or truce, but clearly into an expanded vision'. *Ibid.* The problem with this reading is that it obviously commences from an onto-theological interpretation of the later religious poetry and is therefore, it could be argued, a reading which actually contradicts itself. If Thomas is trying to *disestablish* theological paradigms—which Morgan, to some extent, seems to believe *is* the case—then the argument that he is also attempting to perceive 'absence' with greater meticulousness (God as '*Deus Absconditus*' being a theological paradigm), is an argument involving an inherent *reductio ad absurdum*. Morgan perhaps does not see this because he assumes straightforward semantic *dissimilarity* between the *via negativa* and the *via positiva*.

thereby foregrounding that divinity is not actually ‘silent’ at all.<sup>18</sup> The image, however, is somewhat double-edged, as it elicits a sense of disengagement, rather than unification, between its tenor and vehicle:

A message from God  
 delivered by a bird  
 at my window, offering friendship.  
 Listen. Such language!  
 Who said God was without  
 speech?

It is not that God is ‘like’ a bird, but rather that the poet *conjectures* the existence of God from the purity of the bird’s song. The despatch originates from God yet it is not, as it were, delivered in person. If we were able to directly ‘listen’ to God then clearly whatever ‘God’ it was we heard would not be God properly understood; once more, we would be back at the anthropomorphic (‘God is like...’) or ‘idolatrous’ predicative stalemate. The ‘message’ itself, with its proclamation that God must not be ‘prospected’ for but ‘discovered’—a further subtle distinction in regard to how man’s intelligence often ‘confuse[s] the categories’ (‘The Small Country’, *F*, 19)—continues the theme of disestablishing the theological paradigm so that ‘true’ divinity is finally revealed. Truth has *always* been visible yet so much of our philosophical (and particularly ontological) speculation (‘the X-ray/ eye’ referred to in the poem), disfigures not only what truth is, but *how* truth should be appropriated and approached. The Eliotian metaphor ‘You were a patient, too,/anaesthetised on truth’s table’, inverts the

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Isaiah 55: 11: ‘So is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire, and achieve the purpose for which I sent it’. Cf. also the conclusion to ‘Fleeing for protection’ (*ERS*, 111): ‘Dove of God,/ self-powered, return/ to this wrecked ark, though it be/ with radiation in your bill’.

famously melancholic image in ‘Prufrock’ to suggest that truth, if unhindered by spurious ‘philosophizing’, supports and resuscitates both the divining of selfhood and selfhood’s consciousness of its relationship to the divine. Nevertheless, the poem’s conclusion hints that because of man’s unflagging propensity to intellectualize that which repulses intellectualization, the process of ‘un-anaesthetizing’ consciousness will never really terminate: ‘Meet me, tomorrow,/ I say, and I will sing it all over/ again for you, when you have come to’.<sup>19</sup>

‘The Message,’ therefore, announces what will become a significant theme in *Destinations*: the theological paradigm *itself* is our principal impediment to religious comprehension. ‘Vocabulary’ (*D*, 11), a complicated poem which revisits and delicately recalibrates the avian image of ‘The Message’, seems to posit that although language is *capable* of prevailing over itself, the ‘transcendence’ it purports to offer is largely ephemeral:

Ruminations, illuminations!

Vocabulary, sing for me

in your cage of time,

restless on the bone’s perch.

You are dust; then a bird

with new feathers, but always

beating at the mind’s bars.

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<sup>19</sup> The inferred antagonism between ‘today’ and ‘tomorrow’ here and the explicit opposition of the two nouns in ll. 8-11 perhaps also alludes to the ‘carpe diem’ motif of Matthew 6: 34, ‘Then have no care for tomorrow: tomorrow will take care of itself’. Morgan regards the poem as suggesting that one must ‘turn aside from the search [for God] to *vision* and discovery’ (*R. S. Thomas: Identity, Environment, and Deity*, 189, my emphasis), but this would imply that the only way we can ever ‘detect’ God is through some form of ‘mystical union’ with Him, a belief which Thomas does not appear to be in agreement with at all.

The tonal fluctuations between sanguinity and scepticism here do not seem to imply, as Morgan maintains, ‘ruminations giving way to exclamated illuminations’.<sup>20</sup> Instead, Thomas foregrounds irresolvable conflict between thought in itself and the ways in which thought is articulated. The flightiness of language on the whole, and metaphor in particular (the ‘bird/ with new feathers’), tenders *hope* that truth/ insight may be arrested/ achieved by language; nevertheless, the poet seems acutely aware that, given language’s elemental capriciousness, such optimism is merely transitory:

A new Noah, I despatch  
  
you to alight awhile  
on steel braches; then call  
you home, looking for the metallic  
gleam of a new poem in your bill.

The earlier image of language as that which ventriloquizes thought is subsumed by the negativity of the concluding lines. Language is not so much a phoenix rising magnificently from the dust as a kind of elaborate automaton. The poet’s manipulation of language, once the exaltation of the creative moment has passed, is little more than standardized, mechanical chirping. John Pikoulis, in his provocative essay contesting the more or less accepted view that Thomas’s later work is ‘anti-scientific’, points out that the closing images of the poem seem to signify the *uncertainty* of creative achievement:

In yet another variant of the Creation myth [Thomas], Noah-like, sends his

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 190.

vocabulary to perch on ‘steel branches’; it returns with a ‘metallic/ gleam’ in its bill [...] And so are our days spent in a non-providential universe, ‘in the endless procession/ that goes nowhere (‘West Coast’, *D*, 24).<sup>21</sup>

Given the many references throughout Thomas’s oeuvre to the ‘failure’ of language to arrest and perpetuate a moment, this would appear closer to the mark than Morgan’s pronouncement that, ‘There is no sarcasm in this [the poem’s final metaphors], no bitter irony, but a surprising integration of the modern scientific world and the poet’s visionary world’.<sup>22</sup> One must step guardedly, however, for it is not the case that in ‘Vocabulary’ Thomas is suggesting that the term ‘God’ is semantically deficient. Rather, he seems to be suggesting that divinity must be liberated from wholly *human* conceptualizations (‘the mind’s bars’) for these inject falsifying denotations *into* the original term. Language does not so much disintegrate when confronted with the transcendental, as disclose the misrepresentative *types* of thinking linguistic-metaphysical paradigms produce. As Thomas writes in the sonnet ‘The Other’ (*D*, 15), God is ‘that *other* being’. The switch from the definite article of the title to the ambiguity of the demonstrative pronoun indicates the ‘non-denotative’ nature of ‘God’. It is our recognition of God’s ‘otherness’ or ‘separateness’ *from* the paradigm, whatever it may be, which forms the crux of authentic religious understanding. Once we have discredited the expectations engendered by the paradigm (‘saying everything, meaning nothing’, ‘Destinations’, *D*, 17) and become aware that theological reasoning is effectively reasoning in combat against itself (‘There is an ingredient// in thought that is its own/ hindrance’, *ibid.*), we are able to distinguish the complicated connexions between religious language and religious reasoning. Theological semantics have not collapsed, because by disclosing the hidden mechanisms of theological

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<sup>21</sup> “‘The Curious Stars’: R. S. Thomas and the Scientific Revolution’, in *Echoes to the Amen*, 101.

<sup>22</sup> *R. S. Thomas: Identity, Environment, and Deity*, 190. The adjective ‘visionary’ implies that Morgan believes Thomas to be a ‘mystic’, a construal of the poet’s religious imagination which initiates, as we have seen, many interpretative difficulties and complications.



semantics we have excavated a kind of aporia within which God may reveal Himself to us without the disfiguring interference of the metaphysical archetype. Religious thought, in other words, can begin to cultivate an authentic understanding of what it is actually thought *about*, and so faith becomes less an attitude of ingenuous belief, and more of a spontaneous and developing relationship between man and the divine. The onto-theological paradigm is replaced by religious consciousness viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*, and this severing of the connective tissue between paradigm and divinity inaugurates a reenergised theological comprehension, and one which enables religious consciousness to develop and mature.

If Thomas is attempting to disassemble *all* metaphysical conceptions of God with the eventual purpose of emancipating religious consciousness from the manacles of pre-ordained theological paradigms, then critical views which regard Thomas as ‘heterodox’ or as the kind of religious thinker who has neglected his ‘mother tongue’, appear somewhat misaligned against his true purpose. There is nothing heterodox whatsoever in the view that God is beyond ontological classification—we think once more of the purposeful ambivalence of the Tetragrammaton—so to regard Thomas as theologically ‘anarchic’ is to radically misconstrue the ‘apophaticism’ of his later religious poetry. Negative theology is still a system of theological *reasoning*, and it is hard to imagine that Thomas was not fully aware of the misunderstandings that can occur when one assumes semantic asymmetry between cataphatic and apophatic predication.<sup>23</sup> In ‘The Conviction’ (*D*, 22), for example, the idea, theologically conventional enough, one would assume, that God is ‘time’ (or ‘eternity’) is described as ‘heretical’. Thomas’s dismissal of the predicate vigorously attacks the metaphysical conjecture

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. Marion: ‘man cannot impose any condition, *even negative*, on the initiative of God’. *God Without Being*, 48. Emphasis in original. Thomas explicitly contests the tempting belief that ‘negativity’ and ‘silence’ are the mainsprings of religious worship in the prose passage beginning ‘Not without a struggle’ from *The Echoes Return Slow* (114): ‘His belief that prayer was in silence was the un-swept room into which the seven devils of rationalistic thought would come crowding. Out of the darkness threatening to engulf him he would gasp out his entreaties against his better judgement’. Cf. ‘Mischief’ (*NTF*, 45): ‘I have developed my negatives/ of the divine and preserved their technicolour/ In a make-believe album. I realise/ the imagination is alive only/ in an oxygenated world’.

embedded within it. God cannot *merely* be ‘infinite time’—we are reminded perhaps of Blake’s paradoxical injunction in ‘Auguries of Innocence’ to ‘Hold [...] eternity in an hour’—for the rigidity of the predicate would then deny of God all *other* deific attributes: omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, immanence, and so on. Once more, our gaze would have been transfixed and consequently deceived by the idol. The ontological classification ‘God is eternal time’ would draw God into a purely human, thus idolatrous, compass of understanding. As Aquinas writes:

no created intellect can know God infinitely. For the created intellect knows the divine essence more or less perfectly in proportion as it receives a greater or lesser light of glory. Since therefore the created light of glory received into any created intellect cannot be infinite, it is clearly impossible for any created intellect to know God in an infinite degree.<sup>24</sup>

The beautiful poem, ‘Pardon’ (*D*, 25), with its sequence of practically metaphysical conceits, continues this emphasis on how authentic ‘seeing’ is in effect a complicated, almost evolutionary procedure. The poem maintains that seeing demands continual practice, vigilance, instruction, and *renewal*:

I began by praising the beetle,  
time’s brooch on the earth’s tunic.

I grew bolder. The slug’s glair  
was pearly in the dawn’s jeweller’s shop.

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<sup>24</sup> *The Summa Theologica*, vol. I. Cited in Carlson, ‘Blindness and the Decision to See: On Revelation and Reception in Jean-Luc Marion’, 177, n.12.

I looked at the sky for approval: keep going. The fox was a bush

on fire; the ground holy,

littered though it was with the dove's ashes.

And homo sapiens, that cracked mirror

mending himself again and again like a pool?

Who threw the stone? I forgave him his surface

in the name of the unseen troubler of his depths.

Katie Gramich has argued that the closing images suggest 'it is only in this imperfect, distorted surface [our understanding of divinity] that one may glimpse an image of God'.<sup>25</sup> We can also contend that the syntax in the concluding stanza permits an important, alternative interpretation. It is possible to argue that it is God Himself who, by 'throwing the stone', challenges and unsettles our 'surface' understanding of Him, and so in this sense the poem is an extension of the 'perception/ distortion/ clarification' theme. God is 'disconcerting' man, so God is not really withdrawn at all but dynamically engaged in His creation. Perception requires continual schooling and discernment (we note the progression in the poem from 'beetle' to 'homo sapiens' and the sanction to 'keep going') and it is only by persistently *training* ourselves to 'see'—and therefore *think*—with precision that the truth will eventually be revealed. With the final metaphor Thomas is also perhaps remodelling the 'naming' leitmotif of the earlier verses. The refusal to couple the deific subject-term ('the name') with an

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<sup>25</sup> 'Mirror Games: Self and M (O) ther in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas', 141. The image of the 'cracked mirror' obviously contrasts with the image of both man and divinity as 'love's mirror' in 'Destinations'; thus, as always, we must be attentive to the thematic *intricacy* of Thomas's religious verse.

unambiguous predicate (*'unseen troubler'*) again suggests the referential opacity of the Tetragrammaton. God disrupts all attempts to fasten His name to a solitary predicate—God is most certainly not 'God' as was argued in chapter three and, as Thomas himself said, the divine cannot be limited to 'personality'<sup>26</sup>—but this is merely a logical amplification of how divinity elects to manifest itself within the created universe. We must allow God to *be* God and not some idol generated by reflection: we are 'moral', therefore, God is 'completely moral'; we possess 'reason', therefore, God is 'total reason', and so on. Theology's *real* task is a dismantling and subsequent recalibration of its own exegetical assumptions.

In *Experimenting with an Amen* there are many poems which appear to further explicate this twilight of onto-theological idolatry. 'Cones', the third poem in the collection, picks up the mirror trope of 'Pardon'—'God, it is not your reflections/ we seek'—to submit that true religious knowledge may only be found within a kind of Yeatsian or Eliotian synthesis of movement *and* stasis:

Heartening that in our journeys  
through time we come round not  
to the same place, but recognise it  
from a distance [...]

In

truth we are as far from it  
as one side of the cone  
from the other, and in between  
are the false starts, the failures,  
the ruins from which we climbed,

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<sup>26</sup> R. S. Thomas at *Seventy*. BBC Radio 3 Broadcast, 7 December 1983. See text in M. J. J. van Buuren, *Waiting: The Religious Poetry of Ronald Stuart Thomas* (University of Nijmegen, 1993), 172-81. Quotation from 178.

not to look down, but to feel your glance  
 resting on us at the next angle  
 of the gyre [...]

it is the possibility  
 of your presence at the cone's  
 point towards which we soar  
 in hope to arrive at the still  
 centre, where love operates  
 on all those frequencies  
 that are set up by the spinning  
 of two minds, the one on the other.

The poem implies that God must be acclaimed not only from distance but *as* distance. This is a primary axiom in Marion's theology and one to which we shall shortly return. The obvious reference in the final stanza to the God of 'Burnt Norton' ('the still point of the turning world') reverses the earlier imagery of needlessly peripatetic exploration.<sup>27</sup> Just as deific silence, as Chrétien maintains, is entirely dependent on the possibility of speech,<sup>28</sup> the poem suggests that God's necessary distance is entirely dependent on the possibility of nearness. It is this recognition of simultaneous presence and absence and the accompanying demolition of the

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. also 'Ash-Wednesday': 'If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent/ If the unheard, unspoken/ Word is unspoken, unheard;/ Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,/ The Word without a word, the Word within/ The world and for the world;/ And the light shone in darkness and/ Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled/ About the centre of the silent Word'. Cf. also 'The Rock' with its contention that, 'Endless invention, endless experiment,/ Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness'. Eliot's famous trope of 'knowing the place for the first time' is used also in 'Arrival' (*LP*, 203): 'you are, a traveller/ with the moon's halo/ above him, who has arrived/ after long journeying where he began'.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas certainly did not abandon the theme of both human silence (in the context of prayer) and deific silence as 'loquacious' in the volumes succeeding *Frequencies*. 'Perspectives' (*LP*, 166), for example, is rather pejorative towards 'the sacrifice/ of the language, that is the liturgy/ the priests like'; 'Cadenza' (*LP*, 185) openly disputes the notion that deific 'reticence' is commensurate with 'absence'—'I supposed [...] his thinking was done/ in a great silence'— while the well-known 'Suddenly' (*LP*, 201) begins with the firm assertion that God 'has become voluble'. See also the opening stanza of 'The Presence' (*BHN*, 107), 'I pray and incur/ silence. Some take that silence/ for refusal'.

‘either/ or’ theological paradigm (God must either be ‘near’ *or* ‘far’ but never both at the same instant) that imbues several of Thomas’s later religious poems with their distinctive rhetorical momentum.<sup>29</sup> In ‘Testimonies’ (*EA*, 4), for example, the poem immediately following ‘Cones’, each of the first four couplets explicitly contests the supposition that the understanding of divinity must be attached to a specific ‘predicative’ hypothesis:

The first stood up and testified to Christ:

I was made in the image of man: he unmanned me.

[The ‘Abrahamic’ God displaced by the God of ‘Incarnation’]

The second stood up: he appeared to me

in church in a stained window. I saw through him.

[God as ‘beauty’ or, perhaps, ‘divine artist’]<sup>30</sup>

The third: Patient of love, I went

to him with my infirmity, and was not cured.

[God as ‘omnibenevolence’]

The fourth stood up, with between his thighs

a sword. ‘He came not to bring peace’ he said.

[God as ‘master warrior’]<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> A. M. Allchin, in his *Poetry Wales* review of *Experimenting with an Amen* 22: 1 (1986) 79-81, writes that ‘Cones’ is a poem ‘addressed directly to God, seen in his creation, acknowledged beyond it’. This seems to me incorrect, as the clear references to Yeats’s theory of the ‘gyres’ and Eliot’s belief that divinity is beyond change *and* motionlessness, imply that Thomas is attempting to fuse, rather than disconnect, the polarities of divine ‘immediacy’ and ‘separateness’. The trope of the gyres is used again in ‘AD 2000’ (*EA*, 25).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Psalm 27: 4, ‘One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord’.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Exodus 15: 3, ‘The Lord is a man of the war: The Lord is his name’; Isaiah 42: 13, ‘The Lord will march out like a mighty man, like a warrior he will stir up his zeal; with a shout he will raise the battle cry and will

The pun in stanza two, ‘I saw through him’, suggests that all these notions are spurious; as the concluding stanza affirms, each one of these inferences is a mere ‘parody’ of genuine religious comprehension. Instead of arrogantly ‘testifying’ to what *we* apprehend as true, we must permit God to judge *us* and not the other way about. The apparent contradictions of God’s nature must simply be ‘taken/ on trust’ (‘Coming’, *EA*, 5), although, as several poems within the collection aver, this does not necessitate descent into either quasi-mystical quietism or semi-impulsive fideism.<sup>32</sup> On the contrary, what is really required is to wield a theologically-whetted Occam’s Razor with which to lacerate the *superfluous* from thought. A true theory of religion and religious consciousness will renounce the complicated in favour of the simplified, and theoretic legitimacy, as the earlier poem ‘The New Mariner’ (*BHN*, 99) attests, arises from ‘the marriage of plain fact with plain fact’.<sup>33</sup> It is in this sense, perhaps, that we are ‘experimenting’ with an amen. Religious thought must *continually* ‘test’ the soundness of its own generative paradigms—its intellectual and dialectical substructure—else it risks collapse into invalidity and vagueness.<sup>34</sup> The title indicates that we must not naïvely suppose the deficiencies in our

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triumph over his enemies’; Revelation 19: 11, ‘I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war’.

<sup>32</sup> Kierkegaardian fideism is a great deal more complicated than a mere ‘leap into faith’. As Rowan Williams and William V. Davis point out, the exact nature of Thomas’s relationship to Kierkegaard is ‘difficult to articulate clearly’ and ‘remains somewhat vague’, despite Thomas’s evident interest in Kierkegaard and the explicit references to him in some interviews and especially ‘The Creative Writer’s Suicide’ (‘“Suspending the Ethical”’; R. S. Thomas and Kierkegaard’, 217; *R. S. Thomas: Poetry and Theology*, 127). Kierkegaard’s repudiation of ‘existential paradigms’—the ‘aesthetic’ and the ‘ethical’—leading to the liberation offered by the ‘religious’, could obviously be connected with Thomas’s view that true theological understanding is dependent on the *dismantling* of theological archetypes, rather than any attempt to ‘prove’ their authenticity.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. the delightfully satirical conclusion to ‘Bent’ in the ‘Other Poems’ section of *Between Here and Now* (102): ‘Two million years/ in straightening them/ out, and they are still bent/ over the charts, the instruments,/ the drawing-board,/ the mathematical navel/ that is the wink of God’. Cf. also the conclusion to ‘Covenanters’ (*LP*, 170): ‘The theologians/ have walked round you for centuries/ and none of them scaled you. Your letters remain/ unanswered, but survive the recipients/ of them. And we, pottering among the foot-hills/ of their logic, find ourselves staring/ across deep crevices at conclusions at which/ the living Jesus would not willingly have arrived’.

<sup>34</sup> Graham Davies’s understanding of the title is completely different: ‘In this volume, the threat of reductive and destructive science is insistently stressed. We are “Experimenting with an Amen”—playing with fire. We have allowed technology to rule us rather than vice versa [...] Science is shown to have usurped the position of religion in our lives’. ‘Allies Against Hope’, in *Planet*, 59 (1986), 103-5. Davies’s imputation of censoriousness—‘Amen’ being a metonymy for God—obviously assumes that Thomas does indeed possess a firmly ‘metaphysical’ understanding of divinity, a position which cannot be aligned with the poet’s apparent rejection of *onto*-theology

understanding to be somehow inevitable: ‘Improvisers, he thinks,/ making do with the gaps/ in their knowledge’, ‘Apostrophe’, (*EA*, 9). We must investigate, with ‘scientific’ scrupulosity, the *reasons* why our religious thinking is so often ‘an experiment/ in deception’ (*ibid.*).

‘Hebrews 12: 29’ (*EA*, 11) continues the theme that onto-theology, or *theo-logy*, must be superseded by *theo-logy*. Words about God must be about *God* and not about ‘idolatrous’ conceptualisations of God resulting from the inaccurate use of theological language. John Powell Ward, who rightly deems the poem pivotal for the volume’s general argumentative direction, believes that Thomas is resuming ‘Deus Absconditus’/ ‘theological predication as failure’ motifs:

The biblical verse named is the last in its chapter and something of a surprise when you consult it. The poet teases out the implications, facing that the perceptive seeing with which he began his poetic career has switched from peasants and landscape through science and art to God himself, still finding no ultimate correlative, in reality, for language. He faces with resignation that endlessly producing poem after poem can articulate only our time-bound position. “We have stared, and stared, and not stared/ truth out”, and the name of God appears and disappears.<sup>35</sup>

The phrase from Hebrews (not quoted by Ward) to which the poem refers is, ‘for our God is consuming fire’ but this does not mean, as Ward appears to argue, that God tetchily incinerates all attempts at ‘verbalizing’ the truths of His being. More accurately, the metaphor may be compared with Paul’s contention in 1 Corinthians that God’s actual purpose is to ‘destroy the

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in the post-*Frequencies* collections. Justin Wintle speculates that Thomas’s choice of title may have been influenced by Bishop Robinson’s *Honest to God* of 1963. See *Furious Interiors*, 416.

<sup>35</sup> *The Poetry of R. S. Thomas*, 162.



wisdom of the *wise*' (1: 19). Despite man's confidence in the power of his own mind, his 'avenues/ of vast promise' ('The Fly, *EA*, 8), to surmount philosophical and especially theological difficulties, all attempts at intellectual autonomy will expire in unavoidable failure and pointlessness.<sup>36</sup> Man, as Paul makes clear in Romans 1: 18-20, is created with the *capacity* to know God—'that which may be known of God is manifest [...] For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen'. Nevertheless, our exploration of divinity is often obstructed by the very intellectual presuppositions we bring to the endeavour:

your name has occurred  
 on and off with its accompanying  
 shadow. Who was it said: Fear  
 not, when fear is an ingredient  
 of our knowledge of you? The mistake  
 we make, looking deep into the fire,  
 is to confer features upon a presence  
 that is not human: to expect love  
 from a kiss whose only property is to consume.

Employing the Psalmist's explanation of fear and knowledge,<sup>37</sup> Thomas contends here that there is no need to approach the overwhelming reality of divine love with apprehension or to interpret deific love as a more 'enhanced' version of its human counterpart. The blunder we

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Ephesians 4: 17-19: 'This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart'. It may well be that these verses inspired the conclusion to 'History' (*EA*, 44): 'As the sun went down/ the lights came on in a million/ laboratories, as the scientists attempted/ to turn the heart's darkness into intellectual day'.

<sup>37</sup> 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do his commandments: his praise endureth forever'. Psalm 111: 10. Cf. Deuteronomy 10: 10-13: 'And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in his ways and to love him'.

make is to ‘fabricate’ God from theological hypotheses and metaphysical postulations (‘God is love’),<sup>38</sup> thereby concealing not only what God truly is, but the erroneousness foundations and inaccurate presumptions of our thinking. Idolatry, in other words, disfigures actuality in a kind of unpreventable double bind: the more we regard God as a ‘concept’, the less adept we become in receiving the grace of God’s omnibenevolence. As Eckhart famously said, ‘The eye through which I see God, is the same eye with which God sees me’, his metaphor implying that the hypothetical constructions we implement to decrypt the ‘being’ of God, ‘force’ God into (blasphemous) conformity with our misguided expectations.<sup>39</sup> It does not follow that just because we are finite and limited our attempt to understand the infinite and limitless must of necessity fail. Indeed, notwithstanding purely semantic difficulties, the term ‘Deus Absconditus’ (for it is really an appellation and thus encourages the profane ‘naming’ of God) seems to contain a crippling and unavoidable logical absurdity. By definition God is ‘everywhere’ so, properly understood, the expression ‘*Deus Absconditus*’ suggests that God *cannot* be ‘absent’. In addition, it is incorrect to construe the term as somehow prefiguring an ‘anti-theistic’ interpretation of reality. I must obviously believe in God before I can postulate God’s ‘non-appearance’. Therefore, those who maintain that Thomas ‘believes’ in an ‘absent’ God are perhaps imputing to him a somewhat fallacious manner of theological reasoning. ‘Absence’ not only implies ‘presence’ (the ‘*untenanted* cross’ was previously occupied and is waiting to be reoccupied) but *presupposes* existence. Instead of allowing ourselves to become beguiled (or even ‘blinded’) by terms such as ‘Deus Absconditus’, we should concentrate with greater accuracy on what such terms actually *denote*. As Thomas writes in ‘The Mountains’, we must tutor ourselves *how* to see:

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<sup>38</sup>Of course, ‘On the Farm’ (*BT*, 45) concludes with this exact proclamation, although in this poem Thomas also seems to mean that God’s omnibenevolence must not be ‘interrogated’ but simply acknowledged and lived; hence, the imagery of the preceding lines: ‘Her pale face was the lantern/ By which they read in *life’s* dark book/ The shrill sentence: God is love’. My emphasis.

<sup>39</sup> *The Sermons of Meister Eckhart* (New York: Paulist P., 181), 74.

Too close to see the thing! It is good to stand back sometimes. There are other ways of knowing.<sup>40</sup>

As we saw in chapter one, it is not usual to view Thomas as coalescing deific immanence with human temporality, but the short poem ‘Gift’ (*EA*, 13) makes clear that he certainly believes *some* form of symbiosis between man and the divine is achievable:

Some ask the world  
                                   and are diminished  
 in the receiving  
                                   of it. You gave me  
  
 only this small pool  
                                   that the more I drink  
 from, the more overflows  
                                   me with sourceless light.

Here, God is clearly neither ‘absent’ nor even ‘concealed’. The final image of God as beyond a definitive reference point yet nevertheless fully irrigating creation with tenderness, reveals the isomorphism between conceptions of God as ‘Deus absconditus’ and the metaphysically-confident proclamations of the *via positiva*. To quote another passage from Hebrews, God furnishes us with ‘*evidence* of things unseen’ (11: 1) thereby equipping us, as Paul says, to search with conviction and self-possession ‘for what we do not see’ (Romans, 8: 25). The

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<sup>40</sup> *Selected Prose*, 104.

Anselmian maxim *fides quaerens intellectum* must be taken as a literal statement of theological purpose and not as an anguished cry of shrivelled yet heartfelt belief. The hopelessness we may feel when confronted with the ‘impossibility’ of God will lose its alluring power once we have realised that we should *live*, rather than submissively encounter, the overflows and excesses of deific benevolence.

Faith seeking understanding is not some arid, solely theoretical endeavour; ‘pure being’, as Thomas writes in ‘The Wood’ (*EA*, 16), must be ‘*come at*’, the verb indicating faith’s essentially dynamic character. We must also be careful not to naïvely supplant intellectualism with passive acquiescence. ‘Revision’ (*EA*, 22-3), described by Rowan Williams as an interchange ‘not between faith and scepticism, but between two *levels* or idioms of faith’,<sup>41</sup> also amplifies the crucial idea that the retreat into ‘silence’ is a deformation of authentic religious intelligence:

‘Whoever believes in this fire,  
although he lives, he shall die.’

‘You  
blaspheme. The promises were made  
by you, not to you [...]

Life’s simpleton,  
know this gulf you have created  
can be crossed by prayer. Let me hear  
if you can walk it.’

‘I have walked it.

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<sup>41</sup> ‘Suspending the Ethical: R. S. Thomas and Kierkegaard,’ 214. My emphasis. The ‘Kierkegaardianism’ of the poem is also commented upon by Tony Brown in “‘Blessings Stevens’: R. S. Thomas and Wallace Stevens’, 127-8.

It is called silence, and is a rope  
 over an unfathomable  
 abyss, which goes on and on  
 never arriving.’  
 ‘So that your Amen  
 is unsaid. Know, friend, the arrival  
 is the grace given to maintain  
 your balance, the power which supplies [...]  
 the unseen  
 current between two points, coming  
 to song in the nerves, as in the telegraph  
 wires, the tighter that they are drawn.

In a return to the theme of deific uncommunicativeness as volubility, Thomas insists that unspoken words are the very definition of prayer itself; to quote Chrétien once more: ‘silence before You [...] makes up a possibility proper to speech, which alone can fall into silence [and] by the act of keeping silence, transform silence into an act of presence, and not into privation. Silence is still allocution’.<sup>42</sup> The antiphonal structure of the poem, with one ‘voice’ absorbing then undermining the other—a visual and aural metaphor also, of course, for the paradoxes of religious conviction—shows that prayer is fundamentally an exercise in resisting the persuasive articulacy of scepticism. True faith pursues understanding not through simplified ‘verbalizations’ of divinity but, as John D. Caputo’s Kierkegaardian-referenced argument

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<sup>42</sup> ‘The Wounded Word’, in *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”*: *The French Debate*, ed. Jean-François Courtine, trans. Bernard G. Prusak (New York: Fordham U. P., 2000), 160. The title of Chrétien’s paper brings to mind Thomas’s description of post-lapsarian knowledge as a ‘wound’ in ‘Roger Bacon’ (*F*, 33). Although thought and language have been irrevocably damaged by Adam’s presumption, it is only the Fall which has enabled thought and language to develop. The Fall, we must remember, is also *felix culpa*; as Augustine says in the *Enchiridion*, ‘God judged it better to bring good out of evil, than to allow no evil to exist’.

maintains, by ‘venturing out beyond the limits of givenness into deeper and uncharted seas’.<sup>43</sup> Prayer is the *affirmation* of divine ‘impossibility’ and by affirming divine impossibility through prayer, we make the impossible possible; that is, the apparent ‘impossibility’ of God discloses *itself* as impossible. This understanding of the role of prayer within Thomas’s religious poems can be contrasted with William J. McGill’s interpretation:

Thomas’s poems do not have the quality of prayer. More often than not references to God are in the third person or are by allusion. Even when he addresses God directly [...] the tone is that of dialogue, even argument, not prayer.<sup>44</sup>

McGill’s interpretation of prayer seems rather limited. Prayer *can* be argument and dialogue; when Job, for example, protests at God’s apparent indifference to him, he is still engaged in an act of prayer. Prayer is simply *any* form communication with the divine, so McGill’s ‘dialogues’ and ‘arguments’ are just as prayerful as a recitation of the ‘Our Father’. Chrétien, quoting Aquinas, describes the difference thus:

‘We must pray, not in order to inform God of our needs and desires, but in order to remind ourselves that in these matters we need divine assistance’. To ask God, to accomplish in speech an act of question and request, means that, as we speak to him, we at once and the same time say something about him and something about ourselves, inseparably. We make ourselves manifest to ourselves, we are through speech made manifest to ourselves as we manifest

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<sup>43</sup> ‘The Hyperbolization of Phenomenology: Two Possibilities for Religion in Recent Continental Philosophy’, 89.

<sup>44</sup> *Poets’ Meeting: George Herbert, R. S. Thomas, and the Argument with God*, 157.

ourselves to him [...] This manifestation in speech is, on every occasion and every day it happens, epoch-making, for it is the event of an encounter.<sup>45</sup>

Although faith can only ever permit us to glimpse God through a veil and darkly, the (prayerful) acknowledgement that God has elected to come to us masked or even concealed allows us to formulate *appropriate* responses to Him. In the following passage from *The Crucified God*—a passage which Thomas annotated with the word ‘prayer’ in block capitals—Jürgen Moltmann energetically engages the theme of how ‘metaphysical’ elucidations of God obfuscate and confound our thinking:

[...] is there no “personal” God? If “God” is an event, can one pray to him? One cannot pray to an “event”. In that case there is in fact no “personal God” as a person projected in heaven. But there are persons in God: the Son, the Father and the Spirit. In that case one does not simply pray to God as a heavenly Thou, but prays *in* God. One does not pray to an event but *in* this event. One prays through the Son to the Father in the Spirit. In the brotherhood of Jesus, the person who prays has access to the fatherhood of the Father and to the Spirit of hope. Only in this way does the character of Christian prayer become clear. The New Testament made a very neat distinction in Christian prayer between the Son and the Father. We ought to take that up, and ought not to speak of “God” in such an undifferentiated way, thus opening up the way to atheism.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *The Ark of Speech*, 21-4. The Aquinas quotation is taken from *Summa Theologiae*. Cf. Proclus: ‘To wish to pray is to desire to turn towards the gods; and this desire leads and links the desiring soul to the divine, and it is here that we find what seemed to us to be the altogether principal work of prayer. The act of wanting and the act of praying should thus not constitute two successive stages, but it is at one and the same time that we want to pray and possesses the prayer, in proportion as one wants it’. *Commentaire sur le “Timée”*, vol. II, 45-6. Cited in Chrétien, 24.

<sup>46</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (London: SCM P., 1974), 247. The text is held at the R. S. Thomas Study Centre.

Moltmann's dialectic of Deity, Christ and Spirit lances the heart of the problem. Ontotheological formulations of divinity, such as those which envisage God 'as a person projected in heaven', must of necessity abolish both the Trinitarian and eschatological constituents of Christian faith. If God is simply the occupant of some impenetrable celestial realm, then Resurrection and Pentecost are literally extraneous to theological understanding. The Christological and pneumatological foundations of religious consciousness collapse under the weight of needless, metaphysical machinery. Our anthropomorphic diminution of God to the 'heavenly Thou' not only denies God His required 'impossibility', but also substitutes the veracities of faith with yet more idolatrous misconstructions. Accordingly, the unspoken 'Amen' in the final stanza of 'Revision' may be deciphered as the failure of the poem's penultimate speaker to accept the 'metaphysically impossible' as God's *chosen* 'metaphysic'. The speaker's bluntness in rejecting 'impossibility' as an attainable *imago dei* and his accompanying failure to recognize the obvious incongruity of his own position—'I learn there are *two* beings/ so that, when one is present, the other/ is far off'—results not in further religious questioning or questing but self-abrogating egotism. The speaker's abortive 'amen' sticking in his own throat represents the repudiation of 'impossible possibility', thus leads to the conceited and intransigent speculation that theology must allow 'no room' for the symbiosis of deific immanence and transcendence.<sup>47</sup>

At first glance, all this talk of deific 'impossibility' and 'possibility' may seem mere verbal clatter or, slightly more generously, as prefiguring an appraisal of Thomas's religious verse revolving on the 'poet as mystic' or 'Thomas as negative theologian' critical leitmotifs. If every predicate must be denied of God then surely the only conceivable way we can

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<sup>47</sup> Man as blinded to truth by his own arrogance is also the central theme in 'Retrospect' (*EA*, 60), 'As they became/ cleverer, they became worse'. The same theme is also evident in the mischievously acerbic 'Revision' (*EA*, 69): 'Heaven affords/ unlimited accommodation/ to the simple-minded [...] A bishop/ called for an analysis/ of the bread and wine'.



communicate with God is through ‘mystical’ coalition with Him?<sup>48</sup> Thomas, however, seems fully responsive to the distinction between theological reasoning which regards religious consciousness as phenomenologically redundant in the ‘search’ for divinity and that which advances the *self-reflexivity* of religious consciousness as its primary axiom. Thus, if it is true to say that Thomas’s foremost interest is in penetrating the depths of what Hume famously termed the ‘secret springs and principles’ of the human mind, then an accompanying interest in *why* divinity should be thought ‘impossible’ must be posited as a significant theme in his poetry. ‘Calling’ (EA, 31), for example, modifies the metaphor of experimentation with the ‘amen’ to the comparable metaphor of investigating and hopefully deciphering the ‘code’ of God’s presumed absenteeism: ‘Dialling/ zero is nothing other/ than the negation of his presence’. The irony is palpable: by imagining God as beyond predication we assemble a predicative framework with which to emphasize *and* deny our comprehension of divinity. God *is* present—He must be; by definition, ‘He has no temporal notions’<sup>49</sup>—but our metaphysically-anchored theology unintentionally ‘negates’ deific immanence. As the third and fourth stanzas of ‘Calling’ make clear, such temptations must be stoutly resisted. By personifying God as some kind of telephonic operator—‘at the switchboard/ of the exchanges of the people’ as the earlier poem ‘Present’ caustically has it (F, 9)—we once more ‘abbreviate’ God by means of simplified and disfiguring anthropomorphism. Deific benevolence mutates into ‘the divine snarl’ as a direct consequence of the anthropomorphic compulsion and, as that compulsion originates from the conjecture that the verbalization of divinity is ‘impossible’—God as ‘zero’ on the dial, or as possessing no ‘attributes’—it follows that both our

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<sup>48</sup> Victor Kal notes that Marion is not really a ‘negative’ theologian at all, for just as Marion holds that no predicate may be applied to God (for God is ‘everything’), so it is impossible to *deny* any predicate of God. ‘Being Unable to Speak, Seen as a Period: Difference and Distance in Jean-Luc Marion’, in *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology*, 144-65. Apophasis and cataphasis are a great deal more complicated than they may at first appear; hence, when evaluating Thomas’s religious poetry, it is imperative that the starting point for analysis be an assessment of how these two methods of predication actually *operate*.

<sup>49</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, ed. R. V. G. Tasker (London: J. M. Dent, 1950), vol. 1, Book XI, Chapter XXI, 330.

understanding of divinity and the ways in which we desire to communicate with divinity must be at fault. To think of God as ‘nothing’, as inhabiting unfathomable emptiness and therefore as beyond thought and discourse, may well appear the appropriate, non-idolatrous approach to God, yet Thomas appears to say in this poem that, quite literally, *nothing* shall indeed come of ‘nothing’. Once more the poet’s appeal is to abandon the falsifying ‘anthropomorphisms/ of the fancy’ (‘Emerging’, *F*, 41) and tutor ourselves *how* to ‘speak’ again. ‘Nothingness’ or ‘impossibility’ may *themselves* fulfil the role of predicates and, as a result, nomenclature such as this may create misrepresentative metaphysical ascriptions. The metaphysical ‘neutrality’ of formulations such as ‘God is nothingness’/ ‘God’s nature is impossible to describe’, are as much a consequence of the idolatrous disfigurement of God as the ontologically ‘partisan’ statements, ‘God is Being/ Love/ Eternity’.

According to Marion, the collapse of religious language definitely does *not* mean that mysticism is all we have in our confrontation with the transcendental. More exactly, Marion’s appeal to ‘impossibility’ entails that we must firstly invalidate all onto-theological archetypes, of which ‘mysticism’ is one, before advancing into mature and measured theological judgement. The belief that mystical ‘interaction’ with the nominated few is the sole method by which God chooses to ‘speak’ merely revisits, albeit by means of a circuitous itinerary, yet another idolatrous and misrepresentative point of departure. The ‘mystical’ construal of God maintains that God is beyond rationalization and therefore, for most of us anyway, that God is necessarily uncommunicative. Not only is this position unscriptural,<sup>50</sup> but it obviously commences with the presupposition that God *can* be rationalized: we only arrive at the statement ‘God is beyond reason’ by rationalizing God’s supposed attributes via comparison with our own. Therefore, the very hypothesis that God is ‘beyond reason’ contains the refutation of its *own* logic. Furthermore, to insist that the ‘mystic’ is the solitary conduit

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<sup>50</sup> Cf, for example, Hebrews 1: 1, which maintains that revelation speaks ‘in many refrains, in many different ways’.

between God and ourselves merely swings our veneration from God to man, for now we are listening not to God but to the privileged man who alone overhears the deific locution and afterwards reveals it to us.<sup>51</sup> God, therefore, is completely reliant on the mystic's perfected eardrum in order to communicate with His creation, and the absurdity of such a conclusion shows again the impoverishment of the 'God as beyond reason' onto-theological paradigm.<sup>52</sup> It is in this sense that the 'failure' of religious language is what Marion terms a 'new incitation'.<sup>53</sup> We must continually shatter our erroneous and misshapen 'elucidations' of God in order to liberate our theological language, thereby also refining and ultimately *jettisoning* our superfluous onto-theological ascriptions. As Marion says in an important passage on the mysteriousness of religious alterity and the complex relationships between distance and nearness:

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<sup>51</sup> Thomas derides the idea that one requires a special 'type' of language with which to communicate with God in *C*, 49:

"Make my voice sharp  
so it may rise to the clerestories  
and pierce the ear  
of the great God [...]"

Forget it. The Middle Ages  
are over.

<sup>52</sup> The literature on this subject is immense, but see Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), esp. Part I, chapters 1 and 4, and Part II, chapter 6. On p. 10 of his study, McIntosh quotes the following, stridently-argued passage, from Thomas Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949): 'Contemplation, far from being opposed to theology, is in fact the normal perfection of theology. We must not separate intellectual study of divinely revealed truth and contemplative experience of that truth as if they could never have anything to do with each other. On the contrary, they are simply two aspects of the same thing. Dogmatic and mystical theology, or theology and "spirituality", are not to be set apart in mutually exclusive categories, as if mysticism were for saintly women and theological study were for practical but, alas, unsaintly men. This fallacious division perhaps explains much that is actually lacking both in theology and spirituality. But the two belong together. Unless they are united there is no fervour, no life and no spiritual value in theology, no substance, no meaning and no sure orientation in the contemplative life'. Merton knew and approved of Thomas's work, which was introduced to him by A. M. Allchin. See Merton's letter of June 16<sup>th</sup>, 1967: 'R. S. Thomas is for me a marvellous discovery. A poet like Muir, perhaps better than Muir, with such a powerful spirit and experience, so well conveyed'. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love* (San Diego, California: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 487. For an exhaustive analysis of the 'mystical' approach to knowledge—which also includes a chapter on theological, philosophical, comparativist, and psychological approaches to the subject—see Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (London: SCM P., 1991). For a more reader-friendly discussion and for a history of the medieval background to the subject, see Oliver Davies, *God Within, The Mystical Tradition of Northern Europe* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1988), esp. chapter 1.

<sup>53</sup> *The Idol and Distance*, 141. My emphasis.

*Because* it forever “remains in an inaccessible light” (1 Timothy 6: 16) the unthinkable calls to participation beings that have no common measure with it— no common measure other than a reciprocal disappropriation in distance. Participation therefore never jumps over distance in claiming to abolish it, but traverses it as the sole field for union. Participation grows by participating in the imparticipable as such [...] It is not that transcendence refuses (itself to) participation, since it convokes and gives rise to participation. It is participation itself that presupposes and reinforces transcendence. To participate in the unthinkable is to do so in order to know it, to acknowledge it as such— as unthinkable.<sup>54</sup>

Cartesian and Pascalian characterizations of divinity as ‘incomprehensible’ and ‘hidden’ must be understood in this essentially *symbiotic* manner: ‘advance *coincides* with withdrawal because it is a withdrawal that advances therein’.<sup>55</sup> In the latter half especially of *Experimenting with an Amen*, many poems underscore the need to break away from straightforward onto-theology and welcome instead ‘imparticipable’ and ‘unthinkable’ conceptions of divinity as the very core of religious *thought*. For example, although in the semi-autobiographical ‘Retirement’ (*EA*, 38) Thomas reengages his self-confessed obsession with mirror tropes<sup>56</sup> (‘Must/ I console myself/ with reflections?’), on this occasion he appears to thrust aside the trope’s captivating authority:

I must try to content  
myself with the perception

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<sup>54</sup> *The Idol and Distance*, 156-7. Emphasis in original.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 157. My emphasis.

<sup>56</sup> See ‘Autobiographical Essay’, in *Miraculous Simplicity*, 17.

that love and truth have

no wings, but are resident

like me here...

It is pointless to seek ‘reflections’ or ‘likenesses’ of God, for God is continuously present and does not require detection; as Thomas writes in ‘Confrontation’ (*EA*, 48): ‘It is no part/ of divine mind to repudiate/ its reflections’. What we *do* require, however, is a corrective to our anthropomorphic/metaphysical diminution of God. God will not fly away like a bird—‘He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings shall you trust’, says Psalm 91, the avian metaphor emphasizing deific steadfastness—but even the ecclesiastic may capitulate to crude, anthropomorphic reductionism:

The priest lies down alone

face to face with the darkness

that is the nothing from which nothing

comes. ‘Love’ he protests, ‘love’

in spiritual copulation

with a non-body, hearing the echoes

dying away, languishing under the owl’s curse. (‘Questions’, *EA*, 39)

The reiteration of the Lear-textured image of ‘nothing’ emanating from ‘nothing’ itself makes especially tangible the ironic momentum of the lines. Although envisaging God as some kind of quasi-mystical ‘darkness’ or ‘nothing’, the priest nevertheless apprehends the object of his faith through the distorting lens of ‘personhood’: to describe God as a ‘non-body’ with whom

one ‘copulates’ is still a type of personification. However, because God is beyond ‘personhood’ (as the Tetragrammaton unequivocally proclaims), the priest’s supplication must necessarily and futilely resonate out into a vacuum of his *own* manufacturing.

‘The Cast’ (EA, 41) continues the theme that ‘nothingness’ as theological predicate is inherently ironic (‘We weigh/ nothing’),<sup>57</sup> while the famous ‘A Thicket in Lleyn’ (EA, 45) reemphasizes the importance of the intellect in religious discernment:

‘A repetition in time of the eternal  
I AM.’ Say it. Don’t be shy.  
Escape from your mortal cage  
in thought.

Rowan Williams argues that cyclical redevelopment, leading to a type of ‘deferred’ transcendentalism, is the thematic core of the poem: ‘Imagination, constantly renewing itself by its own fecundity, is also—it seems—mind, thought determined *not* to arrive at a point of mastery and closure’.<sup>58</sup> Such an interpretation can of course be ascertained, but it is also possible to decipher the poem as foregrounding the *evolutionary* character of thought; in this alternative reading of the text, thought is *intensely* ‘end-directed’ and is moving irreversibly *towards* closure. If that is the case, then it follows that ‘A Thicket in Lleyn’ expresses an essentially teleological or even eschatological principal theme. For example, although most commentators assume that the Coleridgean reference conveys the ‘Romantic’ idea that art may arrest and perpetuate a moment in time, there is another significant way in which the phrase may be used to elucidate the text. If we hold that ‘the infinite I AM’ of *Biographia Literaria*

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<sup>57</sup> Cf. *The Echoes Return Slow*, 49: ‘An obsession with nothing/ distinguished him from his co-/thinkers. From dreaming about/ it, he woke up to its immense/ presence’.

<sup>58</sup> “Adult Geometry”, 90, 92. Emphasis in original.

does not appertain to artistic inspiration at all but is, as Jonathan Wordsworth insists, a statement of man's intellectual capacity,<sup>59</sup> then it would seem that Thomas's poem is really concerned with the processes by which one may *enhance* one's understanding of selfhood and divinity. It is *thought* which enables us to escape thought's cage—the mind, as l. 26 makes clear, is *all* we have—but because we are attuned to regard paradox as cognate with contradiction, we overlook the need to continually *revisit* the generative paradigms of our thinking:

Your migrations will never  
 be over. Between two truths  
 there is only the mind to fly with.  
 Navigate by such stars as are not  
 leaves falling from life's  
 deciduous tree, but spray from the fountain  
 of the imagination, endlessly  
 replenishing itself out of its own waters.

There is an argumentative literality in the first two sentences which contrasts rather sharply with the convolutedness of the poem's final images. The extended metaphors of the leaves and spray are anchored lexically to the noun 'stars', with the oddness of the syntax ('as are not') furthering the sense of incongruity. Of course, by 1986 Thomas was far too proficient and experienced a craftsman not to be in firm control of his material—especially, one would suppose, in such an ostensibly important poem—thus, it is reasonable to infer there is a clear objective behind the use of the somewhat incompatible descriptions. The key to interpreting

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<sup>59</sup>See his '“The Infinite I AM”: Coleridge and the Ascent of Being', in *Coleridge's Imagination: Essays in Memory of Pete Laver*, ed. Richard Gravil, Lucy Newlyn and Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: C. U. P., 1985), 22-52.

the flurry of images in the poem's final sentence is perhaps the term 'deciduous', in Thomas's rather idiosyncratic theological lexicon a complicated adjective and one which may be understood in at least two important ways. When Thomas writes of the 'deciduous Cross' in 'The Prayer' (*LS*, 10), it is evident the metaphor implies the regenerative power of Golgotha: the Cross is 'deciduous' because it 'ripens' our awareness of deific immanence. In 'A Thicket in Lleyn', however, the emphatic confidence of the earlier image is supplanted by a kind of despondency, with 'deciduous' now appearing to transmit its secondary meaning of *releasing* something which is no longer required.<sup>60</sup> In this reading, the image of life as a 'deciduous tree' alludes to intellectual regeneration rather than mystical or transcendental 'apartness'. The poem is essentially another argument for the need to 'release' predetermined conceptions of divinity—to 'disprove certainties' ('Countering', *EA*, 33)—before moving to mature ('ripened') religious discernment. The mind must be revolutionized yet this can only occur by means of mind itself, hence the (inevitable) paradox of intellect as both captor and liberator: 'there is *only* the mind to fly with'. The apparently constrictive dialectics of discordancy and paradox, oxymoron and irony, do not generate contradiction or illogicality but are the interior of truth itself. As Thomas was later to write in his pamphlet *Cymru or Wales?*, 'We are familiar in life with the tyranny of "either or" [...] more astute people realise how many shades of grey there can be between black and white'.<sup>61</sup> The slightly jarring images in the poem's final stanza

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<sup>60</sup> In Thomas's verse the same image is often refashioned in such a way as to reverse an earlier connotation, as occurs in the poem beginning 'An account in paint' from *The Echoes Return Slow* (93): 'But are people/ deciduous? They burn more richly/ towards old age, leisurely fountains/ to which we can bring our desire/ to be refreshed'. There is also the reference to the pulpit as 'leafless' in the prose passage 'What had been blue shadows' (*ERS*, 24), meaning that at Manafon Thomas felt himself ill-equipped to minister to the hillmen of his congregation. Cf. also *Counterpoint* 18, 37, 'What is life but/ deciduous?'/ 'Not the empty tomb/ but the uninhabited/ cross. Look long enough/ and you will see the arms/ put on leaves'; 'The Source' (*UP*, 100), 'In the deciduousness/ of the nation it is hard to discover/ pattern'; 'The Tree' (*UP*, 119), 'I speak of the tree in the mind/ its foliage our language'; 'The Undying' (*UP*, 125), 'knowing/ the tree he stood under// was the Welsh tree, not/ borne down with his betrayed/ body, but re-leaving itself/ for joy with the words out of his mouth'; 'Process' (*UP*, 140), 'Not satisfied with/ the fairness of nature/ they began imagining/ the fair city: buildings/ to sail the horizons:/ deciduous fountains always/ renewed'; 'The Seasons' (*MHT*, 68): 'The leaves/ fall variously as do thoughts/ to reveal the bareness/ of the mind's landscape/ through which we must press on/ towards the openness of its horizons'. This multiplicity of response is perhaps intended to foreground the innate complexity of human experience and consciousness.

<sup>61</sup> R. S. Thomas, *Cymru or Wales?* (Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1992), 5.



of simultaneous descension (the leaves) and ascension (the spray), show that religious thought is *deepened* through recognition of its own deficiencies. ‘Failed’ thinking becomes a *commencement*—Marion’s ‘new incitation’—with the concluding images of ‘A Thicket in Lleyn’ emphasizing that thought revitalises itself through continuous dissolution. The poem indicates that considered religious judgement is dependent on conceptual renewal. The ‘two truths’ of either deific ‘immanence’ or deific ‘transcendence’ are, in reality, nothing of the sort. To hypothesize God as either *completely* ‘immanent’ or ‘transcendent’ is to deny of God the antithetical attribute, and this leads, by logical necessity, to the blasphemous rejection of deific omnipotence: if God is immanent then He ‘cannot’ be transcendent and vice versa. As in ‘Remedies’ (*H*, 24), the poem appears to posit the ‘need as always of a *third/ Way*’; that is, a method of thinking which rejects the monocular in favour of the symbiotic. Thus, rather than a straightforward assertion of ‘mystical’ or ‘aesthetic’ transcendence, the Coleridgean reference is perhaps intended to demonstrate a *technique* by means of which religious thought may evolve:

The poet by echoing the primary imagination, recreates. Through his work he forces those who read him to do the same, thus bringing them nearer the primary imagination themselves, and so, in a way, nearer to the actual being of God as displayed in *action*.<sup>62</sup>

The Coleridgean reference, therefore, would appear to stimulate a teleological rather than epiphanic interpretation of the poem. By regarding the primary imagination as an intellectual conduit rather than an end in itself, we both clarify *and* emancipate our theological reasoning.

The tendency to hold God as an ‘object’ and therefore reject distance as that which

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<sup>62</sup> Introduction to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, in *Selected Prose*, 64. My emphasis.

*expresses* immanence—our eyes are often ‘blinded/ by distance’ (Requiem’, *LP*, 211)—is explored further in ‘Folk Tale’ (*EA*, 53). In this poem, the Rapunzel story is employed to show both the fallaciousness of the anthropomorphic reduction of God and the conceptual confusion that results when one presupposes divine ‘transcendence’:

Prayers like gravel  
                                 flung at the sky’s  
 window, hoping to attract  
                                 the loved one’s  
 attention. But without  
                                 visible plaits to let  
 down for the believer  
                                 to climb up,  
 to what purpose open  
                                 that far casement?

To regard God as a ‘person’ who somehow exists ‘above us’ merely leads us into additional frustration and bewilderment. Our temptation to tell ‘Him what he is like’, as the later poem ‘A congregation at prayer’ (*ERS*, 55) wittily expresses it, corrupts genuine religious understanding. We request that God makes Himself ‘visible’ yet, when He refuses to comply, we assume that either He does not exist or is capriciously mocking us with transitory hints at His presence. Distance, however, *is* nearness, for in eliminating the *objectification* of God, we ‘emancipate’ God from the garret constructed around Him by onto-theology:

I would

have refrained long since  
                   but that peering once  
 through my locked fingers  
 I thought that I detected  
                   the movement of a curtain.<sup>63</sup>

The penultimate image of the entwined fingers seems to imply that although prayer must rid itself of the anthropomorphic compulsion, to disconnect prayer from onto-theological projections of divinity is a far from simple exercise. The locked fingers, with Thomas peeping fearfully through them, perhaps also symbolize the anxiety one experiences as an after-effect of what Marion terms the prohibition of ‘ontic treatment concerning God’.<sup>64</sup> We are so accustomed to envisaging God as a ‘being’ that, in shattering the metaphysical paradigm, we create for ourselves further distress and agitation.

The ironic and difficult truth of revelation *within* distance is also the thematic cornerstone of ‘Approaches’ (*EA*, 55):

We began by being very close.  
 Moving nearer I found  
 he was further on, presence  
 being replaced by shadow;

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<sup>63</sup> The metaphors of the twitching curtain and the locked fingers were first used three years earlier in ‘Feminine Gender’, an uncollected poem published in *Poetry Wales*, 18.3 (1983): 30. See *UP*, 122. I am grateful to Jason Walford Davies for pointing out the poem’s relationship to the onomatopoeic opening of the Welsh folk-stanza: ‘Titrwm, tatrwm,/ Gwen lliw’r wy,/ Lliw’r meillion mwy rwy’n curo,/ Mae’r gwynt yn oer oddi ar y llyn/ O flodyn y dyffryn deffro’. Saunders Lewis quoted a variant reading of the last line in an article in *Y Faner*, and did so in a cultural/ nationalist context. Thomas read this article and was ‘stirred through and through’. See *Autobiographies*, 54.

<sup>64</sup> *The Idol and Distance*, 140.

the nearer the light, the larger  
the shadow.

John Powell Ward asserts that the God presented throughout the collection is a ‘trying adversary and elusive stranger’.<sup>65</sup> In this particular poem, however, Thomas appears to be stressing the lacuna between God and ‘being’ or God and ‘God’, rather than offering us any specifically ‘ontological’ (God as ‘adversary’/ ‘stranger’) model of divinity. By progressing towards God, the poet finds that the object of his search retreats before him; thus, it would seem that his initial conceptualisation of God must somehow be at fault. If this is the case, then the poem’s tone becomes heavily ironic, with the enjambement from ll.3-4 perhaps suggesting a somewhat ‘literal’ interpretation of the opening image. Presence/ being *is* ‘shadow’, for in the same way that deific ‘invisibility’ necessitates visibility, the ‘distance’ between man and God does not separate but unite. The more we attempt to ‘define’ God (‘Not even to be able to say,/ pointing: Here Godhead was spilled’) the more we find that God disappears over the horizon of our thinking. This, however, is simply because our thinking commences from a counterfeit, or ‘idolatrous’, point of departure. As St. Paul says at the beginning of Romans, ‘the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen’, yet we continue to substitute ‘the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man’ (1: 20-23).

‘Where?’ (*EA*, 57) and ‘This One’ (*EA*, 58), similarly expound the conceit of shadow as that which illuminates. The texts also foreground the accompanying idea that what we misguidedly label ‘religious thinking’ is the source of our misperceptions:

the heart  
fills not with light

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<sup>65</sup> *The Poetry of R. S. Thomas*, 158.

from the mind, but with the shadow  
too much light casts. ('Where?')

Sometimes a shadow passed  
between him and the light.  
Sometimes a light showed itself  
in the darkness beyond. ('This One')

These images, like the concluding lines of the previously discussed 'The Film of God' (*F*, 47), appear to allude to, and subtly recalibrate, Plato's famous metaphor of the cave. The shadows on the wall, as the liberated prisoner eventually comes to realise, do not constitute the real world at all, but it is only by carefully *tutoring* the intellect that the necessary breakthrough can be made. In Thomas's adaptation of the metaphor, the point seems to be that shadows *are* truth; however, we can only appreciate this, if we first rid our thinking of the assumption that the shadow *obscures* truth.<sup>66</sup> 'Definitions' of God as 'dazzling darkness' or as dwelling in 'inaccessible light'—in other words, God *as* 'shadow' or 'outline'—provide a non-idolatrous *method* by which we may understand and subsequently appropriate divinity. The purposeful 'imprecision' of such formulations avoids the reductionist interpretation ('God as being', 'Logos', etc.) whilst enabling the mind to theorize its *proper* relationship to divinity. 'This One' suggests particularly that to 'grasp' the totality of God there must be a kind of 'self-

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<sup>66</sup> Cf. the concluding lines of 'It was arranged so' (*C*, 48) and 'There must be the mountain' (*C*, 59):

we lost our footing  
and fell into a presence illimitable  
as its absence, descending motionlessly  
in space-time, not into darkness  
but into the luminosity of his shadow.

And to enthrall the journey  
that has no ending, once in a while  
the falling of his shadow.

amputation’ of our usual intellectual practices. The obvious counterpointing of the ‘searching’ image of ‘Approaches’ shows that thought must be inward (or ‘ingrowing’), rather than fixated upon that which seemingly exists ‘outwith’ thoughts’ parameters: ‘From receding/ horizons he has withdrawn/ his mind for greater repose/ on an inner perspective’.<sup>67</sup> In the same way that magnets distract a compass—‘My mind’s compass windily veers/ From point to point and is not true’ (‘Not So’, *UP*, 49)—concepts such as ‘God as absent’ (which obviously assumes deific ‘being’) divert us from our true destination. Characterizations such as this pull us towards a particular ‘metaphysics’ of God, thereby condemn us to bewilderment and perplexity. As Heidegger said in response to the question, ‘Is it proper to posit Being and God as identical?’:

Being and God are not identical and I would never attempt to think the essence of God by means of Being [...] If I were yet to write a theology—to which I sometimes feel inclined—then the word *Being* would not occur in it. Faith does not need the thought of Being. When faith has recourse to this thought, it is no longer faith. This is what Luther understood. Even within his own church this seems to be forgotten. One could not be more reserved than I before every attempt to employ Being to think theologically in what way God is God.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> To strengthen the idea that our whole understanding of intellectual ‘travel’ must be revolutionized, the trope in the *Listener* article of travelling without the projection of termini is utilized again through the rhetorical question in ll. 7-8: ‘Are there journeys/ without destinations?’ In ‘Journeys’ (*MHT*, 28), the *Listener* trope is fashioned into an entire poem:

The deception of platforms  
where the arrivals and the departures  
coincide. And the smiles  
on the faces of those welcoming

and bidding farewell are  
to conceal the knowledge  
that destinations are the familiarities  
from which the traveller must set out.

<sup>68</sup> *Séminaire de Zurich*, trans. D. Saadjian and F. Fédier, in *Poesie*, 13 (Paris, 1980), 60. Cited in *God Without Being*, 61.

‘This Being who’s not a Being’. Thomas’s much-quoted, and much-misinterpreted, assertion to J. B. Lethbridge makes explicit his preference for *theo*-logical reasoning and the subsequent redrawing, if not outright elimination, of the onto-theological paradigm.<sup>69</sup> It is the presuppositions of faith, the *praeambuli fidei*, which need to be examined if one is to avoid conflating the lexicography of words with the thematic discussion of concepts:

The unthinkable [God as simultaneously ‘possible’ and ‘impossible’] forces us to substitute the idolatrous quotation marks around “God” with the very God that no mark of knowledge can demarcate; and, in order to say it, let us cross out G⊗d, with a cross, provisionally of St. Andrew, which demonstrates the limit of the temptation, conscious or naïve, to blaspheme the unthinkable as an idol. The cross does not indicate that G⊗d would have to disappear as a concept [...] but that the unthinkable enters into the field of our thought only by rendering itself unthinkable there by excess, that is, by criticizing our thought. To cross out G⊗d, in fact, indicates and recalls that G⊗d crosses out our thought because he saturates it; better, he enters into our thought only in obliging it to criticize itself [...] We cross out the name of G⊗d only in order to show ourselves that his unthinkableness saturates our thought— right from the beginning and forever.<sup>70</sup>

All ‘conceptual’ discourse regarding the divine is ‘idolatrous’. Marion’s neologism is an

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<sup>69</sup> ‘R. S. Thomas talks to J. B. Lethbridge’, in *Anglo-Welsh Review* (1983), vol. 74; 40. Thomas was of course referring to Tillich, who was himself heavily influenced by Heidegger. See David H. Kelsey, ‘Paul Tillich’, in *The Modern Theologians*, 64-5.

<sup>70</sup> *God Without Being*, 46.

attempt to demonstrate that the ‘death’ of God, despite the oft-assumed literalism of the Nietzschean axiom, is really the expiration of misrepresentative deific *prototypes*. It is only by both ‘crossing out’ God and ‘crossing over’ from ‘God’ to G⊗d that we fully de-anthropomorphise divinity. Marion’s neologism proposes a *stratagem* by means of which we may enable deific truths to irradiate consciousness.<sup>71</sup>

In a similar manner to Marion’s non-‘ontological’ elucidation of divinity, ‘Andante’ (EA, 61) indicates that Thomas believes the term ‘God’ must be released from its semantic and ontological fetters:

Masters, you who would initiate  
me in discourse, apostrophising  
the deity: O Thou, to Whom...  
out of date three hundred years.

The pun in the second line (redolent also, perhaps, of God as ‘H’m’) foregrounds both the antiquarianism of a religious discourse premised upon the ‘God as divine person’ paradigm, and how such a discourse inadvertently delimits religious thought. The ontological-anthropomorphic inclination does not magnify divine truths but ‘apostrophises’ or ‘contracts’ them. If we hold that Thomas’s portrayal of landscape in the next poem, ‘A Country’ (EA, 62), is essentially a representation of *conceptual* topography, then here too the text posits that imaginative reconstruction of hitherto accepted archetypes is the keynote of developed religious understanding: ‘I know its background,/ the terraces/ of cloud that are the hanging gardens/ of the imagination’. Geoffrey Hill, glossing ‘A Country’ with one of Kierkegaard’s

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<sup>71</sup> It is also possible to view Marion’s ‘G⊗d’ as a kind of ‘masking’ or *prosopopoeia*. As was argued in chapter three, this trope seems to control many of the Aberdaron religious poems. In much the same way that Thomas’s dismissal of ‘God’ as proper name stimulates a new understanding of how religious language actually functions, Marion’s neologism is intended both to disclose *and* obscure deific reality.



journal entries in which the philosopher remarks that ‘imagination is what providence uses to get men into reality’, says that the poem ‘reads like a sketch-plan of the process’.<sup>72</sup> This description that could also be applied to the final stanza of ‘Cures’ (*EA*, 66):

And the mind,  
 then, weary of the pilgrimages  
 to its horizons— is there no spring of thought  
 adjacent to it, where it can be  
 dipped, so that emerging but  
 once in ten thousand times,  
 freed of its crutches, is sufficient  
 testimony to the presence in it  
 of a power other than its own?

Thought here is its *own* restorative—we notice especially how the adjective ‘adjacent’ gives way to the preposition ‘in’ of the penultimate line—Thomas’s reworking of the Lourdes story (‘the virgin smile on the face/ of the water’) indicating that spiritual truth ‘springs’ from *intellectual* transformation and renewal. Imagistic ‘doubleness’ is detectable throughout the poem. The reiteration of the ‘horizons’ and ‘pilgrimages’ motifs convey that the mind has crippled and exhausted itself through the erroneous presumption that truth lies beyond it. Conversely, in the same way that the waters of the famous Marian shrine function as a physical curative, as soon as one immerses the mind within *itself*—when one confronts, in other words, one’s intellectual presuppositions—one refreshes and rejuvenates one’s intelligence. If religious thought is to advance beyond the anthropomorphic compulsion, we must examine

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<sup>72</sup> ‘R. S. Thomas’s Welsh Pastoral’, 55.

*why* onto-theological narratives which posit God as a metaphysical ‘entity’ beyond man’s horizon of understanding are radical misapprehensions of deific truth. We persistently conceive of God as a kind of Christianised adaptation of the pagan gods of Mount Olympus, for example, but this, as Thomas makes clear in the heavily-sardonic final lines of ‘Look Out’ (*EA*, 68)—lines which may allude again to the Sisyphian myth—is as self-repudiating as it is intellectually spurious:

And history: ‘I have wasted  
all my time  
in ascending him, but  
there is no view from the top.’

If we examine the history of religious thought, we immediately grasp the essential hollowness of metaphysically-premised theology. We need not ‘clamber up’ to God, for God is quite evidently not a ‘being’ awaiting detection. In point of fact, thought which ‘descends’ into itself (once more, ‘ingrowing’ thought) has far better prospect of truthfully ‘imaging’ the non-imaginable *imago dei*. A literal iconoclasm is required if we are to evade the mesmerizing allure of the ‘God as being’ archetype. It is necessary to shatter *all* idolatrous ‘images’ of God before we can praise the overwhelming reality of God as agape: ‘Deus caritas est’ (1 John 4: 16). To understand God as cognate with agape, requires that our thinking *commence* with the conception of God as limitless love rather than with any distortive, or ‘man-made’, onto-theological paradigm. ‘We love, because *He first loved us*’ (1 John 4: 19). The Johannine text reverses the ‘I-Thou’ dialectic. It is not so much that since *we* are capable of love God must exist as ‘complete’ love, but more that since God *initially* loves us, we must of necessity *participate* in love. Ontology therefore gives way to praxis in the same way that

anthropomorphism is replaced by anthropocentrism. In order to understand God we must firstly understand *ourselves*; we must investigate *why* we feel so compelled to ‘verbalize’ divinity through the disfiguring conduits of metaphysical nomenclature. To conceive of God as non-metaphysical ‘being’ is thus analogous to the argument given in chapter three that deific ‘taciturnity’ is actually loquacious.

Thomas makes the comparison between metaphysics and ‘silence’ explicit in the second poem in the volume entitled ‘Revision’ (*EA*, 69). The noisy spuriousness of the ‘metaphysically’-minded bishop’s understanding of deific presence is set against the poet’s own absorption in quietness and distance:

A bishop  
 called for an analysis  
 of the bread and wine. I being  
 no chemist play my recording  
 of his silence over  
 and over to myself only.

‘No chemist’ and, if the foregoing comments on *Destinations* and *Experimenting with an Amen* are correct, then, by conscious resolve, Thomas is certainly no ‘metaphysician’ either:

What I’m tilting at is not God, but the ideas of God [...] and I think people might get the wrong end of the stick. Sort of say, “Thomas doesn’t believe in God”. I believe in God, I’m trying to show how people sometimes attempt to pin down this, this Being who’s not a Being.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> ‘R. S. Thomas talks to J. B. Lethbridge,’ 40.

In order to unshackle theology from metaphysics and emancipate the mind from the distortive ontological compulsion, we must renovate completely the foundations of our religious thinking:

The West has been under the thumb of reason for a very long time. Because of this we divide everything into A and not-A. Nothing can be A and not-A at the same time.<sup>74</sup>

God is simultaneously unimaginable and imaginable, proximate and distant, immanent and transcendent:

And by day you are abroad  
 endlessly exploring a circumference  
 by which you are not confined.  
 You have no words yet vibrate  
 in me with the resonance of an Amen [...]  
 but always as far off  
 as you are near, terrifying  
 me as much by your proximity  
 as by your being light-years away. ('Near and Far', *NTF*, 46)

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<sup>74</sup> R. S. Thomas, 'Unity', in *Planet*, 70 (1988), 33. In the same lecture, Thomas discusses Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics*: 'Capra alleges that scientists of the past fell prey to their own concepts, mistaking their symbols for reality itself'. Ibid. If we were to replace 'scientists' with 'theologians' here, we would have an effective definition of Thomas's principal theme in much of his religious verse.



## Chapter Six

### **‘Without idolatry/ I can follow’: Iconicity and Christology in *The Echoes Return Slow* (1988) to *No Truce with the Furies* (1995)**

To regard God (or G⊗d) as cognate with agape, is, by definition, to move from ontology to Christology. Rowan Williams, in his important paper investigating the relationship between Thomas and Kierkegaard, remarks that ‘Thomas’s doctrine of Christ would be a fruitful subject for further investigation’.<sup>1</sup> I would like to conclude this thesis by taking up the assignment suggested by Williams and examining what appears to constitute an important change of direction in Thomas’s religious poetry post-*Experimenting with an Amen*. Whereas previous volumes focussed almost exclusively on the God of philosophical theism, much of the poetry from *The Echoes Return Slow* to *No Truce with the Furies* seems more concerned with exploring agapaic disclosure as revealed through the person of Christ.

Once more, the thought of Jean-Luc Marion will be employed as an interpretive fulcrum. As well as demolishing the theo-*logical* paradigm, Marion’s conversion of God into G⊗d is intended to display the various ways in which God, ‘reveals himself by his placement on a cross’.<sup>2</sup> In Marion’s theology, Christ is God’s literal self-expression—‘the Said of G⊗d’<sup>3</sup>—thus, if Thomas’s ‘doctrine of Christ’ may be regarded as comparable to Marion’s dialectic of Christ *as* immanence, then the former’s God becomes less ‘Deus Absconditus’ and more ‘Verbum Dei’. As Marion writes in ‘Of the Eucharistic Site of Theology’, the chapter in *God Without Being* regarding his elucidation of divinity as agape:

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<sup>1</sup> “‘Suspending the Ethical’: R. S. Thomas and Kierkegaard’, 213.

<sup>2</sup> *God Without Being*, 71.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

To justify its Christianity, a theology must be conceived as a logos of the Logos, a word of the Word, a said of the Said [...] Only the Said that lets itself be said by the Father can assure the pertinence of our logos concerning him [...] To do theology is not to speak the language of Gods or of “God,” but to let the Word speak us (or make us speak) in the way that it speaks of and to G⊗d: “Receive the spirit of filiation, in which we cry, ‘Abba, Father’” (Rom. 8: 15) [...] In short, our language will be able to speak of G⊗d only to the degree that G⊗d, in his Word, will speak our language and teach us in the end to speak it as he speaks it.<sup>4</sup>

Divinity, argues Marion, must be ‘thought’ and ‘said’ outside the horizons of Thomist *esse* or Heideggerian *Sein*, for example, and *within* the horizon of Christic revelation. Christianity is Jesus Christ in the ‘dialectic’ of Incarnation-Cross-Resurrection-Second Coming.<sup>5</sup> God speaks through Christ, and Christ, in succession, addresses us: ‘My glorification I have in Christ’ (Romans 15: 17); ‘May he who is glorified, be glorified in the Lord [...] your glorification, brothers, I have in Christ’ (1 Corinthians 1: 31; 15: 31). Christ *is* the Word: ‘the Word pitched its tent among us’, John (1: 14). Christianity is not so much a matter of ‘knowing’ the ‘unthinkable’ or ‘impossible’ God as responding *to* God *through* Christ, and in order to respond to Christ, we must obviously know *how* to receive Christic love.

To enable Christic discovery, Marion draws a crucial distinction between idolatrous representations of God and the hermeneutics of the icon. As we have seen, the idol, according to Marion, functions as a kind of mirror reflecting back at us our own [blasphemous] conceptualizations of divinity. The icon, by contrast, ‘shows’ invisibility by disclosing

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 143-4.

<sup>5</sup> We could obviously expand this idea by arguing that, in addition to symbolizing the Resurrection, Thomas’s famous ‘untenanted cross’ image *also* indicates the not-yet event of the Second Coming.

distance; that is, the icon gestures *beyond* itself. Moreover, the icon allows its iconography ‘to be transgressed— not to be seen, but to be venerated’.<sup>6</sup> The icon rouses our imaginations because it,

attempts to render visible the invisible as such, hence to allow that the visible not cease to refer to another than itself, without however, that other ever being reproduced in the visible. Thus the icon shows, strictly speaking, nothing [...] It *teaches* the gaze.<sup>7</sup>

It is in this sense of the icon as theological ‘educator’ that the supreme ‘form’ of icon is of course Christ; as Paul’s significant metaphor has it, Christ is ‘icon of the invisible Father’ (Colossians 1: 15). It is Christ, and Christ alone, who instructs us how to understand divinity *correctly*. When Jesus asks the disciples, for example, ‘Who do men say that I am?’ He is requesting that the community of faith ask *itself* that question and is therefore encouraging believers to *clarify* their understanding of His messianic mission. Whereas the ‘idol’ captivates and deceives the intellect, the ‘icon’ tutors and guides it. In addition, since the icon refers to that which is external to itself and because Christ, as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed decrees, is ‘consubstantial with the Father’, by interpreting Christ ‘as icon’ we are able to ‘capture’ divinity without the (idolatrous) disfigurements of anthropomorphic reductionism:

The Son made man does not offer a reproduction of a god who is himself otherwise visible, according to a relation of resemblance or dissemblance measurable by some norm other than his face. He brings into visibility the definitive invisibility of the father, who remains all the more invisible insofar

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<sup>6</sup> *God Without Being*, 19.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 18. My emphasis.



as no face [*visage*] will ever be suitable to him other than the face [*face*] of his Christ. In this sense, the Christ indeed offers the icon, and not the reproduced image [...] For the invisible Father, the original, as to visibility, remains once and for all the figure of the Christ.<sup>8</sup>

## I

As M. Wynn Thomas observes, ‘a purely psychological reading’ of *The Echoes Return Slow*, that most autobiographical of Thomas’ collections, must be counterbalanced by receptivity to the multiple theological allusions which punctuate the text.<sup>9</sup> For example, if one were to read the volume’s opening poem in isolation from the ‘accompanying’ prose passage— notwithstanding the obvious reference to the poet as ‘nobody’ in the first line—it is clear one’s interpretation would pivot on a fundamentally ‘Christological’ theme:

I have no name:  
 time’s changeling.  
 Put your hand  
 in my side and disbelieve  
 in my godhead. (*ERS*, 3)

Here, it seems to be both the God of Exodus—‘I have no name’—and Christ who are speaking.

The interwoven, soundless yet prolix voices of the Father and the Son, challenge ‘doubting’

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<sup>8</sup> *The Idol and Distance*, 176. Cf. pseudo-Dionysius: ‘We do not know God starting from his own nature (which is unknowable, and beyond any mind as beyond reason), but starting from the disposition of all beings, inasmuch as it comes to us starting from Him, and inasmuch as it comprises certain icons and resemblances of divine paradigms’. *The Divine Names*, VII, 3, 869 c-d. Cited in Marion, *ibid.*, 179.

<sup>9</sup> “‘Time’s Changeling’: Autobiography in *The Echoes Return Slow*”, in *Echoes to the Amen: Essays After R. S. Thomas*, 184.

(R. S.) Thomas to acknowledge the truth of the Resurrection. In this sense, the appellation ‘time’s changeling’ may be deciphered as a kind of ‘unembroidered’ metaphor for the Incarnation. God ‘become’ man quite literally ‘changes’ time (‘I am the Alpha and the Omega’) yet, because of our reluctance to fully embrace deific love, spiritual ‘new birth’ is not so much transformative expectation as continually delayed possibility: ‘The marks in the spirit would not heal. The dream would recur, groping his way up to the light, coming to the crack too narrow to squeeze through’ (*ERS*, 2).

The trope of baptism’s reformatory and restorative power is also employed in the two poems immediately following ‘I have no name’. The opening line of the first of these poems, ‘The scales fell from my eyes’ (*ERS*, 5), is an obvious reference to Saul’s Damascene conversion, after which, of course, Saul received the sacrament of baptism (Acts 9: 18). ‘And beyond those silk/ curtains’ (*ERS*, 7) is a compressed, almost surrealistic reworking, of the narratives in Matthew and Mark of Salome’s dance before Herod and the subsequent death of John the Baptist. John baptised Christ with water but Christ baptises men with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3: 11); thus, the first three poems seem to allude not only to Thomas’s actual birth but to his potential *rebirth* in Christ’s name: baptism, of course, is also ‘christening’. Thus, although one would not wish to overstretch the admittedly slender connections, it *is* the case that the volume begins with a sequence of ‘Christianized’ references to spiritual, as well as purely physical, awakening, maturation and development.

Several scholars have pointed out that the poems of *The Echoes Return Slow* offer many tonal and thematic counterpoints to the prose passages. However, as far as I am aware, little has been said regarding the Christological texture of the work as a whole.<sup>10</sup> The extended

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<sup>10</sup> In a telling comment, Wynn Thomas—undoubtedly correctly—writes that Thomas’s foremost intention in bringing poetry and prose together is to ‘explore the multi-dimensional character of the self’. “‘Time’s Changeling’”: Autobiography in *The Echoes Return Slow*, 185. To this we could perhaps also add the ‘multi-dimensionality’ of art itself. The poems often engage, then ‘amend’ or ‘correct’, the adjacent prose passages. This seems similar to Thomas’ ‘challenges’ to painting in *Between Here and Now* and *Ingrowing Thoughts*; hence, it is possible to interpret the volume as a purely ‘literary’ variation of the two ekphrastic volumes’ themes.

metaphor of the tree in the poem beginning ‘Our little boy he paint a tree’ (*ERS*, 17)—a poem influenced, perhaps, by John Crowe Ransom’s ‘Dead Boy’<sup>11</sup>—seems to terminate with an oblique reference to the Crucifixion, ‘There is no fruit on it but his’. This reading is obviously reinforced if we recall Thomas’s oft-quoted depiction of the same event in the much earlier poem ‘In a Country Church’ (*SYT*, 114): ‘He kneeled long,/ And saw love in a dark crown/ Of thorn’s blazing, and a winter tree/ Golden with fruit of a man’s body’. The self-accusatory diction of the prose passage (‘when his eye should have been on the book, he saw, with raised eyes, the wild drake mallard winging skyward’) is destabilized by the poem’s tone of heartfelt and innocent suffering. The latter text’s intimation that the dead collier child is somehow evocative of the Christ-Child, undercuts the blunt fact of infant mortality with suggestions of hopefulness and rebirth. The supposedly ‘unanswerable questions’ (*ERS*, 20) of existence and death, affliction and grief, find their potential answer in the regenerative power of Golgotha.

The Christic theme is broadened by Thomas in the concluding stanza of ‘I saw the land’ (*ERS*, 29):

And I waited there at the gateway  
 on the uncertain boundary between  
 road and field, not sure of where  
 I belonged: whether on the conveyor-belt  
 of the traffic, or out in the soil  
 as though at the foot of another  
 cross with a different saviour  
 on it, and one never to come

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<sup>11</sup> Ransom’s poem concludes: ‘He was pale and little, the foolish neighbours say;/ the first-fruits, saith the Preacher, the Lord hath taken;/ But this was the old tree’s late branch wrenched away,/ Grieving the sapless limbs, the shorn and shaken’. Ransom’s ‘Eclogue’ was included by Thomas in his *Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, 95-8.

down, because of his human rags.

The first stanza's portrayal of Christ as a 'scarecrow [...] an old totem of the soil', metamorphoses into an imagery of eternal, yet at the same moment mortal, Christic transcendence. It is Jesus's *human* authenticity that establishes the relationship between Creator and creation. The very fact of Christ's broken body signifies that He is *also* agapaic revelation.<sup>12</sup> Christ's simultaneous humanity and divinity mean that He is forever 'suspended' between God and man: He cannot 'escape' the Cross '*because of his human rags*'. Approached in this manner, 'I saw the land' seems a straightforward argument for conventional trinitarianism.<sup>13</sup> The poem, vigorously 'counterpointing' the hesitancy of the adjacent prose passage ('The priest again questioned his vocation'), is impatient to renounce *all* forms of docetic heterodoxy. The humanity and death of Christ are certainly real and constitute all the evidence we require for God's dynamic manifestation within the created universe. Although one may entertain 'autumn thoughts' (*ERS*, 30), to allow undue prominence to such feelings will lead either to downright scepticism or to the temptations of naturalistic pantheism.

In continuation of this theme, the short poem following 'I saw the land', a poem worth

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas was fond of comparing Christ to a scarecrow. See 'Look Out' (*EA*, 68), 'Come Down' (*MHT*, 39), 'The Word' (*MHT*, 71). Cf. also 'Two Shirts on a Line' (*NTF*, 60), which may be interpreted as an extended variation upon the metaphor, and the sonnet 'Welsh Shepherd', an uncollected poem from 1949 (*UP*, 31). It may be that Thomas was influenced here by the second stanza of Saunders Lewis's 1942 poem, 'To the Good Thief', which uses the same comparison: 'It was when he was bleeding you saw him, callously whipped,/ A crown of thorns upon his head; standing there stripped;/ Then nailed on a pole like a sack of bones,/ Outside the Pale, like a scarecrow...' See *Presenting Saunders Lewis*, ed. Alun R. Jones and Gwyn Thomas (Cardiff: U. W. P., 1983), 184.

<sup>13</sup> The contemporary systematic theologian Colin Gunton writes in *Act and Being: Toward a Theology of Divine Attributes* (London: SCM, 2002), 77: 'All of God's acts take their beginning in the Father, are put into effect through the Son and reach their completion in the Spirit. Put otherwise, God's actions are *mediated*: he brings about his purposes towards and in the world by the mediating actions of the Son and the Spirit, his "two hands".' Emphasis in original. Marie-Thérèse Castay thinks that the image of the 'human rags' is fundamentally non-theistic: 'He [either Thomas himself or 'anyone not accepting the modern way of life'] can either opt for the "conveyor-belt/ of the traffic", most effectively combining two of the blights of urban technology, or the transformed [...] countryside which looks as if it had given itself a new god who, with "his human rags", evokes the scarecrow at the end of the first stanza and is denied transcendence [...] the argument has given way to despair'. 'The Self and the Other: the Autobiographical Element in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas', 137-8. As the crucified Christ was *literally* wearing 'human rags', Castay's argument seems rather bewildering.

quoting in full, makes the unambiguous statement that one must be especially vigilant not to supplant Christian edicts with the vulgar and simplistic adoration of nature:

It was winter. The church shone.  
 The musicians played on  
 through the snow, their strings sang  
 sharper than robins in the lighted interior.

From outside the white  
 face of the land stared in  
 with all the hunger of nature  
 in it for what it could not digest. (*ERS*, 31)

The personification in the concluding quatrain expresses the irreconcilability of Christianity with the pantheistic impulse. We must venerate not nature but Nativity, for even birdsong proves an inadequate ‘melody’ for worship when contrasted with the man-made music of Christian praise. The poem’s opposition between secular and religious appreciations of nature is similar to that suggested in the prose passages ‘The voices of temptation’ (*ERS*, 26), ‘The highway ran through the parish’ (*ERS*, 58), and the poem ‘Around you the bunched soil’ (*ERS*, 27). The first of the prose passages concludes with an apparently unambiguous replacement of religion with (non-metaphorical) materialism—‘The woods were holier than a cathedral’—but the poem radically transforms (non-metaphorical) earthiness through the diction of religion: ‘Myself I need the tall woods,/ so church-like, for through their stained/ windows and beneath the sound/ of the spirit’s breathing I concede a world’. What is especially noticeable here is the surprising use of ‘concede’. The verb indicates both the poet’s acknowledgement of something

beyond the purely material, and how careful reflection upon the quiet splendour of the natural world may provide ‘proof’ of transcendent reality. The same verb is used in a comparable way in ‘The wrong prayers for the right reason?’ (*ERS*, 45): ‘Concede// the Amens’. It is given a further, heavily-ironic twist in ‘Faces looked up at the pulpit (*ERS*, 54): ‘And the boys’ parents, educating their sons to make money as a gentleman should, inclined to concede that religion could be a capital concern’. Nature and religion are ‘reconciled’ later on in the volume: ‘The breaking of the wave/ outside echoed the breaking/ of the bread in his hands.// The crying of sea-gulls/ was the cry from the Cross:/ Lama Sabachthani’ (*ERS*, 69).<sup>14</sup>

In ‘It was winter’, the later Thomas’ Christocentric inclinations seem particularly well-defined. Only through the Incarnation may Godhead be approached truthfully and, despite what the more literal of the pantheists may suppose, it is crucial to separate Incarnation from creation *per se*. The next prose passage and poem also investigate the ironies and paradoxes of Christic love:

The books stood in rows, sentinels at the entrance to truth’s castle. He did not take it by storm. He was as often repulsed as he pretended to have gained ground. And yet... (*ERS*, 32)

The aposiopesis, like breadcrumbs marking a pathway, leads us directly into the facing poem.<sup>15</sup> Here, the determined clamouring of the text’s ‘voices’ represents an obvious thematic expansion of what Thomas had previously glossed as the Yeatsian ‘quarrel within’ (*ERS*, 22):

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. *ERS*, 85: ‘This is the wrong Christmas/ in the right place [...] and look,// the sand at the year’s/ solstice is young flesh/ in a green crib, product/ of an immaculate conception’.

<sup>15</sup> Katie Gramich remarks that Thomas’s poems are ‘characteristically dialectical in form’ (‘Mirror Games: Self and M(O)ther in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas’, 132) and it is certainly possible to view Thomas’s polyphonic arrangements of poetry and prose in *The Echoes Return Slow* as a *structural* demonstration of how all serious thought is ‘eternally/ in contradiction’ (*C*, 39).

And this one says to me:

You are an occasion

merely [...]

There are voices superannuating

the Bible [...]

You have no address,

says life, and your destination

is where you began. (*ERS*, 33)

The weary pessimism of these lines, however, is overturned by the poem's concluding sentence:

But love answers it

in its turn: I am old now and have died

many times, but my rebirth is surer

than the truth embalming itself

in the second law of your Thermo-Dynamics.

Irrespective of scepticism's often unassailable position ('He was as often repulsed as he pretended to have gained ground') it is impossible to repudiate the eternal truth of Christic love. The poem's earlier tenor of disenchantment and hopelessness is reversed. Indeed, the concluding images transform the argument that life is fruitless searching into an 'East Coker'-varnished message of confidence and reawakening. Our destination *is* where we 'began' because deific love, since it has never absented itself, clearly does not need to be 'found'.<sup>16</sup> It

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<sup>16</sup> The Eliotian allusion appears again in the final sentence of 'Momento mori' (*ERS*, 44), 'He was reminded all too soon that journeying is not necessarily in the right direction' and in the last stanza of the adjacent poem: 'With

is our refusal to acknowledge the *simplicity* of deific love that leads us to pose what Thomas oxymoronically terms ‘unanswerable questions’ (*ERS*, 20); that is, questions which are not really questions at all, for a question can only exist where an answer does also. Nevertheless, to become aware of God *as* Christ requires continual self-tutelage and self-discovery.<sup>17</sup> As is declared explicitly in the short poem occupying the structural centre of the book, ‘What I ask of humans’ (*ERS*, 61), to conceive of God ‘without idolatry’ requires that one must possess the intellectual courage to move *from* theological ‘metaphysics’ *to* the overwhelming and eternal truth of the Resurrection:

What I ask of humans  
 is more than human  
 so without idolatry  
 I can follow. While he,  
  
 who is called God, now  
 scorches with sparks of  
 blood, now glaciates me  
 in the draught out of his tomb.

The volume’s Christological substructure is reinforced by ‘Are you coming with us?’ (*ERS*, 67). The poem absorbs and ironically inverts the self-deprecatory tone of the adjacent

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the end/ nowhere, the travelling/ all, how better to get/ there than on one’s knees?’ Eliot’s famous trope of ‘knowing the place for the first time’ seems to constitute the rhetorical centre of Thomas’s important 1974 article ‘Where do we go from here?’

<sup>17</sup> Thomas further contrasts authentic religious questioning with pseudo-questioning in ‘The problems are never only external’ (*ERS*, 48): ‘To think is to raise questions that are unanswerable. “About that of which we cannot speak, we must needs be silent.” He evaded Wittgenstein, if not the publisher, by committing his silence to paper’. The conceit of ‘writing’ silence makes explicit Thomas’s view that God *can* be ‘verbalized’ and, if that is the case, then it follows that God is ‘knowable’.



prose passage. In the latter text Thomas is fully aware that, despite his life-long endeavour to assuage ‘the painful *hiraeth* for the sea’,<sup>18</sup> geographical travelling is not necessarily the counterpart to spiritual discovery: ‘For some there is no future but the one that is safeguarded by a return to the past [...] Was his poetry wiser than his action?’ (*ERS*, 66). In the poem, however, Thomas juxtaposes his peripatetic wandering against the everlasting reality of the Incarnation:

On a different road it is we  
are for going on, but ‘Stay’  
you say, contemporary with a future  
never to be overtaken.<sup>19</sup>

The Emmaus narratives in Mark and Luke are skilfully reversed. In Thomas’s poem, Christ repels the entreaties from Cleopas and his companion that He ‘stay’ with them and requests instead that they ‘stay’ with Him. Once more, Thomas recycles the important trope in *The Listener* article of traveling as ‘inertia’. The Resurrection is eternally present so there is no need, as the two final lines of the poem confirm, either to search for Christ or to hold that salvation lies outside the current moment: ‘Take therefore no thought for the morrow, for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself’ (Matthew 6: 34). The Incarnation must be *lived*, not ‘detected’, with every Eucharistic celebration delivering irrefutable proof of agapaic reality and disclosure; as Thomas writes of his own Eucharist celebrations at St. Hywyn’s, ‘The simplicity of the Sacrament absolved him from the complexities of the Word’ (*ERS*, 68).

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<sup>18</sup> *Autobiographies*, 91.

<sup>19</sup> It is possible that the poem owes something to Saunders Lewis’s description of the same event in his poem ‘Emmaus’. Both texts stress that the self needs to be transformed if it is to fully experience the Resurrection, Lewis’s poem concluding with the ‘personalized’ lines: ‘Is it a phantom Arab or Rabbi?/ Or, increasing woe! is it me/ Awaiting the dawn of that short hour/ Of Emmaus which exists no longer’.

Analogous to Vaughan's conception in 'The Night' of deific love as 'dazzling darkness', Thomas envisages agape as blinding us with 'excess of light' (*ERS*, 69), the image suggesting again that it is our *vision* that must be transformed if we are to celebrate fully the Resurrection's 'unending story' (*ERS*, 81).<sup>20</sup>

Since the three poems 'What I ask of humans', 'Are you coming with us?' and 'The breaking of the wave' obviously address, in chronological sequence, the Resurrection, the encounter on the road to Emmaus, and the supper at Emmaus, it is surprising that several important scholars have overlooked the collection's underlying Christocentric dynamics. Christopher Morgan, for example, commenting on the various ways *The Echoes Return Slow* uses 'light' imagery, concludes that Thomas considers 'brokenness' as 'endemic to human existence'.<sup>21</sup> This is patently not the case. 'The breaking of the wave' makes clear that Thomas regards the celebration of Christ through the Eucharist as all we require in order to overthrow what is described in the adjacent prose passage as 'intellectual snobbery' (*ERS*, 68). Our persistent desire to 'analyse' the Incarnation should be replaced by a desire to simply 'live' it. Once more, Thomas repudiates dry intellectualisation in favour of vibrant and re-energising praxis. William J. McGill, in the fifth chapter of his study of Thomas and Herbert, writes that Thomas had little interest 'in using his poetry to explore and articulate issues of eucharistic theology'.<sup>22</sup> McGill, however, seems to contradict himself, for after examining various Eucharistic allusions in Thomas's work from *Poetry for Supper* onwards, he concludes his discussion with the following statement: 'Thomas's language about the Eucharist is [used] not primarily to affirm God's love, but to assert that the Cross is the central *question* of Christianity,

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<sup>20</sup> A. M. Allchin points out that the 'excess of light' image echoes Dafydd ap Gwilym who wrote of 'A chalice of ecstasy and love'. *God's Presence Makes the World: The Celtic Vision through the Centuries in Wales* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997), 156. Thomas's understanding of agape as that which both stimulates and transfigures, seems extremely similar to Marion's: 'The silence that is suitable to the G@d who reveals himself as agape in Christ consists in remaining silent through and for agape [...] Love is not spoken, in the end, it is made. Only then can discourse be reborn, but as an enjoyment, a jubilation, a praise'. *God Without Being*, 107.

<sup>21</sup> *R. S. Thomas: Identity, Environment, and Deity*, 33.

<sup>22</sup> *Poets' Meeting: George Herbert, R. S. Thomas, and the Argument with God*, 82.

in a sense its central—and most difficult—metaphor. Thus, the Eucharistic images he invoked are less affirmations of doctrine or of personal penitence, than they are challenges to our hubristic nature'.<sup>23</sup> This argument contains a *reductio ad absurdum*. If Thomas's Eucharistic imagery is intended to 'challenge' narcissism, then it follows that he must be 'premissing' his imagery, at least in part, on a *specifically* doctrinal understanding of the Eucharist. The Eucharist provokes us into accepting what it promises, so if Thomas is juxtaposing the Eucharist against man's self-absorption, then it follows that Thomas's Eucharistic theology is solidly 'doctrinal'.

The Crucifixion's transformative power is asserted unambiguously in the final sentence of 'There were other churches' (*ERS*, 82): 'The Cross is always avant-garde'. The facing poem, employing again the Platonic trope of 'shadows' that deceive the intelligence,<sup>24</sup> contrasts our musty and threadbare religious thinking with the regenerative intensity of Golgotha:

So we learn  
 something of the nature  
 of God, the endlessness  
 of whose recessions  
 are brought up short by  
 the contemporaneity of the Cross. (*ERS*, 83)<sup>25</sup>

Of course, by contrasting God Himself with the 'temporality' of the Incarnation Thomas does not mean to propose some form of *bifurcation* between God and Christ. Rather, his request is

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. 'The Film of God', (*F*, 47); 'Where?' (*EA*, 57); 'This One' (*EA*, 58).

<sup>25</sup> The trope of the 'contemporary' Cross resurfaced two years later in 'Insularities', a poem first published in *New Welsh Review*: 'There, amid// baptismal currents, her faith/ is as lichen, clinging/ closely to a fabricated cross/ that is contemporary always'. *UP*, 137.

that we substitute *theo-logy* with *theo-logy* and, in this particular instance, *theo-logy* with *theologia crucis* or ‘theology of the Cross’. If God, as Malachi informs us, is ‘immutable’ (‘I am the Lord, I change not’, 3:6) then, *a priori*, God does not endlessly recede. In this sense, the metaphor of God’s mutability would appear to refer not to God Himself but to man’s *conceptualizations* of God. Consequently, it is possible to contend that with the poem’s closing lines, Thomas is accentuating yet again how we must be vigilant not to replace the ‘true’ God of Incarnation with the ‘false’ God of ‘anthropomorphised’ metaphysics: ‘Growing up/ is to leave the fireside/ with its tales,/ the burying of the head/ between God’s knees’ (One Life’, *MHT*, 56). By contemplating the continually present mercy of Christ—‘the contemporaneity of the Cross’—we are also investigating our *own* intellectual and religious temperaments; as the prose passage immediately following ‘The church is small’ maintains, in order to correctly understand the Incarnation we must nurture within ourselves ‘nativities of the spirit’ (*ERS*, 84).<sup>26</sup> *Through* the Son we engage in colloquy with Father—‘The word now is dialogue’, wrote Thomas, censuring Herbert’s (metaphysical) view that God is some kind of divine ‘companion’<sup>27</sup>—and colloquy is as dependent upon listening as it is upon exclamation. Silence is *inseparable* from colloquy, for silence, as was argued in chapter three, is also a communicative occurrence. To mistake deific silence for deific absence is a grave inaccuracy and one which promotes an erroneous interpretation of the human-divine relationship.<sup>28</sup> We

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<sup>26</sup> ‘Credo’, in *Mass for Hard Times* (13), reengages the Cross metaphor: ‘(And how contemporary/ is the Cross, that long-bow drawn/ against love?)’ In this poem, the ironic parentheses interrupting the main clauses foreground our unwillingness to fully accept the difficult stipulations of the Creed. We faint-heartedly deny ourselves a ‘nativity of the spirit’, because the *true* acceptance of divinity, like Kierkegaard’s ‘leap’ into faith, is dependent on intellectual courage: ‘Wringing/ our hands, we wring our belief/ dry, refusing from pride/ or shame after the failure/ of our species the one cultivable/ remedy the intellect disdains’. (‘The Refusal’, *MHT*, 40).

<sup>27</sup> R. S. Thomas, *A Choice of George Herbert’s Verse* (London: Faber, 1967), 16. In the ‘Introduction’ to his selection of Herbert’s poetry, Thomas wrote that Herbert’s central theme ‘was an argument, not with others, nor with himself primarily, but with God’. 12. With regard to Thomas’s religious poetry, it seems that quite often he is arguing with and against himself. To appropriate Wittgenstein’s famous definition of philosophy, Thomas appears to believe that authentic religious understanding is ‘a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language’.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *ERS*, 97: To the church on the hill  
 three women came  
 with the need to escape  
 from the echo of their silence [...]

must not attempt to ‘locate’ Christ within the parched and soundless ‘musty sandwiches’ of books (*ERS*, 15),<sup>29</sup> but inculcate within ourselves *authentic* receptivity to deific-Christic ‘uncommunicativeness’. As Thomas writes of his retirement on the Llyn Peninsula:

Have I been brought here  
 to repent of my sermons,  
 to erect silence’s stone over  
 my remains, and to learn  
 from the lichen’s slowness  
 at work something of the slowness  
 of the illumination of the self? (*ERS*, 103)<sup>30</sup>

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I listened to them singing  
 grey hymns with the mould  
 on them; doled them  
 the hard crust of communion  
 and the tart wine, facing them  
 at last with the answer  
 of the locked door to the question  
 they were too late to ask.

Here, the women have failed to understand the ‘colloquy’ of Eucharistic celebration. They have not embraced deific silence and thus have not become receptive to its compelling articulacy. As the clever puns ‘doled them’ and ‘hard crust’ in the penultimate stanza make clear, the women’s spiritual poverty means that the *richness* of Eucharistic celebration—‘Like sun crumbling the gold air’, as the earlier poem ‘Bread’ (*PS*, 46) describes it—is both distorted and ignored.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. ‘“Then what is truth?”/ the scholar inquired,/ creeping from word to word/ in the text-book, half expecting/ to come on it from behind’. (*ERS*, 101).

<sup>30</sup> Cf. ‘Tricyano-aminopropene-’ (*C*, 55):

Supposing, down at our roots,  
 we began taking in  
 minerals of non-violence,  
 measuring our development  
 by the conditioned photosynthesis  
 of an inward light.

To ‘illumine’ the self and, by extension, to elucidate the *true* nature of the human-divine relationship, is a life-long project and one requiring persistence and tenacity. To ‘escape from [the] looking glass’ (*ERS*, 108) of solipsistic self-regard, means tutoring the mind to liberate itself from that hall of mirrors into which it so repeatedly leads itself. The poem ‘He is his own/spy’ (*ERS*, 113) consolidates the point:

He is at our side  
 watching the space-launch  
 of our prayers [...]

He listens in  
 at the self’s councils [...]

He is the double-agent  
 of life [...]

He is what escapes always  
 the vigilance of our lenses,  
 the faceless negative  
 of himself we dare not expose.

The steady diction of espionage and the suggestion that God must somehow be ‘tracked’ and ‘captured’ is overturned by the unexpected final pronoun: ‘*we* dare not expose’. We already *have* the ‘blueprint’ of God in our hands—‘I am with you always’ says Christ at the conclusion

of Matthew's Gospel—yet we are reluctant to reveal truth for trepidation of what we may encounter: 'we *dare* not expose'. The pun on 'negative' in the penultimate line is perhaps redolent of 'Via Negativa' (*H'm*, 16 )—one of Thomas's most famous 'apophatic' poems—where the tension between 'presence' and 'absence' is resolved by the Johannine metaphor, 'We put our hands in/ His side'. In 'He is his own/ spy' something of a comparable theme is evident. The 'search' for God is quite literally meaningless because that which does not 'absent' itself does not require detection. The fault lies within mankind for misinterpreting the *nature* of deific 'absence', so in this sense the concluding photographic image is heavily ironic. We *already* possess the only 'picture' we need of God, yet we persist in thinking that God must exist in some 'better' or 'more original' form. The verb 'dare' seems both an exhortation and a challenge. Courage is as necessary to the Christian life as knowledge and prayer, yet the 'devils of rationalistic thought' (*ERS*, 114) often compel us to 'decode' courage as mere simple-minded hopefulness: 'he would gasp out his entreaties against his *better* judgement' (*ERS*, *ibid.*). This, however, is not an incitement for some sort of 'fideistic' leap into the unknown, but more an appeal for clarity of vision. The devilishly obstinate voice of 'reason' may whisper that deific 'absence' is cognate with deific non-existence, but if we are 'daring' enough 'to give away [...] assurances' (*ERS*, 116)—that is, if we embrace *faith*—then agapaic revelation becomes both imaginable *and* discoverable:

Hear me. The hands  
pointed, the eyes  
closed, the lips move  
as though manipulating  
soul's spittle. At bedsides,  
in churches the ego

renews its claim

to attention [...]

At times

in the silence between

prayers, after the Amens

fade, at the world's

centre, it is as though

love stands, renouncing itself. (*ERS*, 117)<sup>31</sup>

The egocentric proclamation that 'man is the measure of all things' is gently hushed by the compelling articulacy of deific silence.<sup>32</sup> Prayer is the concession that God's 'uncommunicativeness' is God's selected method of communication. 'God', says Fénelon, 'never ceases to speak; but the noise of creatures without and of our passions within deafens us and prevents us from hearing it'.<sup>33</sup> Christ is the 'aperture', as it were, through which God elects to express Himself.<sup>34</sup> The poem's final image, of a personified love 'renouncing' or 'forsaking' itself, seems an implicit reference to Christ's quotation, at the moment of death, of the opening to the famous twenty-second Psalm: 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?'<sup>35</sup> The

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<sup>31</sup> I am grateful to Tony Brown for pointing out the Christic allusion within 'soul's spittle'. In John 9: 6, Christ spits on the ground and puts the resulting mud over the blind man's eyes, thereby making him see again. It may be, then, that the metaphor of 'soul's spittle' could be connected with the general theme of perceptual renewal.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *ERS*, 89: 'I have waited for him/ under the tree of science,/ and he has not come [...] I have [...] put a cross/ there at the bottom/ of the working out of their problems to/ prove to them that they were wrong'. The ribbing of scientific rationalism by way of the obvious pun on 'cross', foregrounds again the volume's underlying Christological theme.

<sup>33</sup> François Fénelon, 'De la parole intérieure', in *Lettres et opuscules spirituels*, X, *Oeuvres*, ed. Le Brun, vol. I (Paris, 1983), 590. Cited in Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, 54.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Northrop Frye, *Words with Power*, 110-11: 'The emphasis on "word" in the Bible implies that the will to communicate with man is part of the essence of God [...] The New Testament is presented as a gospel, a verbal communication coming from a Word made flesh, a presence in whom the distinction between the end and the means of communication has disappeared. Such a message has the gift of tongues, i.e. the ability to make its way through all the barriers of language. The frequently repeated phrase "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear" is not an elitism restricting the message only to those previously chosen to hear it. It is rather an appeal to make one's response depend as little as possible on the conventions of one's conditioning and prejudices'.

<sup>35</sup> A. E. Dyson appears to have somewhat misunderstood the eschatological 'purpose' of Christ's anguished cry. See chapter 3, n. 97. The Psalm immediately following the twenty-second, perhaps the best known of all the



quotation provides the dénouement to both Old and New Testament narratives of deific agape. John, for example, records Christ's last words as 'It is finished', the pronoun signifying His entire ministry as the 'Suffering Servant' of Psalm 22, and the phrase in its entirety is traditionally glossed by theologians as 'The Word of Triumph'. The 'dark night of the soul' (*ERS*, 116), like all dark nights, will not endure, although to recognise God *as* love—*Deus est Caritas* rather than *Deus Absconditus*—means to juxtapose the self-serving 'wisdom of humans' (*ERS*, 118) against the self-abandonment of Christic suffering:

And this one writes and he knows

being wise: 'Loving

is courage, there is no fear

in love.' I take the beam

from my eye. 'Friend,'

I murmur, 'there is a mote

in yours; I will not

remove it. Here is my heart

to be hurt [...]

Am I not

also in the debt of love?' (*ERS*, 119)

Lao Tzu's simplistic assertion that love is the repudiation of suffering is challenged and inverted by Thomas's poignant metaphor. In Christianity the heart must *offer* itself to be bruised and even torn apart, if it is to participate fully in the Passion and Resurrection of the

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Psalms ('The Lord is my shepherd'), is an explicit statement of salvific hopefulness. Psalms are also intended to 'counterpoint' each other.

Crucified Christ.<sup>36</sup> As in ‘He is his own/ spy’, in this poem too, *authentic* Christian living is portrayed as dependent on courage. The earlier poem posited that ‘epistemic’ courage is vital to an understanding of divinity; in this text, the appeal is to ‘moral’ courage: we must recognize that pain, torment and even defeat, are inescapable realities of Christian existence. Christ suffered and so we too must suffer if we are to embrace Christ’s salvatory vision: ‘For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps’ (1 Peter 2: 21).<sup>37</sup> The secularist ‘wisdom’ of the Taoists is radically overhauled—‘my thoughts are not *your* thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord’ (Isaiah 55: 8)—for Christianity *necessarily* entails the eradication of purely ‘human’ approaches to knowledge. In order to ‘interpret the things of God in a way that befits God’, as pseudo-Dionysius says, we must expurgate the arrogance of Protagorean subjectivism from our thinking.<sup>38</sup> Man is not the measure of anything, for man’s existential authenticity is entirely contingent upon agapaic revelation. Thus, the volume’s thematic wheel turns full circle. The ‘marks in the spirit’ have been healed by the gentleness of the heart, and the concluding line of the concluding poem in the collection, seems to signify both conjugal love and the mysterious endlessness of God’s love for creation: ‘“Over love’s depths only the surface is wrinkled”’ (*ERS*, 121).<sup>39</sup> Love, both conjugal and deific, will triumph over time; we must look not at surface appearances, but *teach* ourselves to witness—that is, to *see*—the eternal within the transitory.

## II

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<sup>36</sup> Lao Tzu’s aphorism is in his *The Book of the Way*. There is no evidence that Thomas read this, but we can certainly contend that he may have been stimulated to read it through his reading of Fritjof Capra.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. 1 Peter 4: 1: ‘Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind: for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin’.

<sup>38</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, ed. Colm Luibheid (London: SPCK, 1987), 107.

<sup>39</sup> The line perhaps owes something to Ephesians 3: 17-19: ‘That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge’.

*Counterpoint* is Thomas's fullest expression of the Christological theme and, although other motifs are clearly discernible, it seems obvious, given the collection's 'eschatological' structure, that an examination of agape forms the pivot around which the 'supplementary' themes revolve.<sup>40</sup> Despite the book's innovative construction and the inherent interest of many of its poems—it is the only one of Thomas' collections to use Christian nomenclature as an organisational principle, for instance, and also contains his solitary attempt at concrete verse—several notable critics have confessed themselves somewhat nonplussed by *Counterpoint*. A. M. Allchin, for example, frankly admits 'that there are quite a number of poems in [*Counterpoint*] which I find simply baffling'<sup>41</sup> while Tony Brown comments, 'After the autobiographical concerns of *The Echoes Return Slow*, one is struck by the sardonic impersonality of much of the sequence and intrigued by the ingenuity of thought and image rather than emotionally moved'.<sup>42</sup> Brown's remark in particular seems apposite. It is certainly true that many of the poems in *Counterpoint* seem peculiarly 'detached' from sentiment—perhaps, in a way, even tonally 'callous'—and so one may be tempted to establish a correlation between *Counterpoint*'s portrayal of deity and the various ways in which deific 'aloofness', as William V. Davis has described it, is depicted in *Frequencies*.<sup>43</sup>

*Counterpoint*, however, possesses something which the earlier collection does not. Along with *The Echoes Return Slow*, *Counterpoint* is the most architecturally homogenous of all Thomas's volumes, and so any critical evaluation of *Counterpoint*'s 'deity' must commence by showing how structure and theme are reciprocally interdependent. As a consequence of the volume's architectonics, *Counterpoint* is not a 'collection' of poetry at all but a kind of

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<sup>40</sup> As 'supplementary' themes we could distinguish: the relationship between divinity and language/ silence (*C*, 9; 15; 43; 50; 51; 58); the relationship between 'naming' and selfhood (*C*, 18; 46); the nature of ekphrastic representation (*C*, 26; 28); the 'self-reflexive' characteristics of religious consciousness (*C*, 11; 12; 17; 24; 25; 32; 34; 39; 53; 60).

<sup>41</sup> 'Out of the Silence', *Planet* 85 (1991), 99.

<sup>42</sup> *Bulletin of the Welsh Academy*, no. 21 (Winter 1990), 12.

<sup>43</sup> 'Gaps in the Poetry of R. S. Thomas', 90.

‘sustained poetic narrative’ regarding the various connections between eschatology and soteriology, immanence and transcendence, atonement and redemption. Sabine Volk-Birke, in a lengthy and interesting paper, has performed the valuable service of showing the various ways in which the book’s structure perhaps owes something to Hopkins’s conception of ‘counterpoint rhythm’, an observation which seems both insightful and accurate. However, Volk-Birke somewhat mars her analysis by the insistence, throughout her paper, that Thomas remains compelled and fettered by ‘negative theology’.<sup>44</sup> These two comments seem to contradict each other. If Thomas were utilizing, at least to some extent, Hopkins’s verse-model ‘of the “ideal” and the actual’,<sup>45</sup> the former ‘positive’ and the latter ‘negative’, then why would he make explicit, through the volume’s construction, the eschatological ‘positivity’ of the work as a whole? Narrative is what drives the poems; we are moving *from* ‘before Christ’ to ‘after Christ’, from sin and death to reconciliation and atonement. Volk-Birke’s argument that Thomas is ‘counterpointing’ what religion ‘abstractly’ says against the punishing actualities of life, is one which disregards the teleological movement of the sequence as a whole.<sup>46</sup> Clearly, the poems of *Counterpoint* must be evaluated as components within a strictly delineated and

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<sup>44</sup> Sabine Volk-Birke, ‘World History from BC to AD: R. S. Thomas’ Counterpoint’, in *Literature and Theology* vol. 9, no. 2 (June, 1995), 199-226. That Volk-Birke regards negative theology as nothing other than ‘negative’ there can be no doubt: ‘A number of Thomas’ previous poems worked in the same manner [as the eighth poem in the sequence], using the insights of negative theology (which goes back to Dionysius Areopagita), accepting that only negations can convey the nature of divinity’ (ibid., 208); ‘The thirteenth poem [ of ‘AD’], again a sonnet, affirms this belief in the language of negative theology, stressing the necessity of the attempt to find God, even if only our desire points the way and the goal remains elusive’ (ibid., 222); ‘Negative theology stresses the fundamental inadequacy of human language to develop any concept of God as he is by his very nature inaccessible to words’ (ibid., 224). Volk-Birke appears to be arguing that a ‘negative’ theological language cannot be a *theological* language at all, an argument with which pseudo-Dionysius would not agree.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 199. In Hopkins’ poetic system, ‘counterpoint’ represents a kind of twofold cadence: there is the tempo of a strict metrical pattern and the internal tempo of an individual line. Volk-Birke maintains that Thomas takes this idea and gives it a metaphysical/ epistemic twist: the ‘ideal’ is religious orthodoxy and the ‘actual’ are Thomas’s feelings of, ‘rebellion [...] negation [...] and despair.’ Ibid., 200.

<sup>46</sup> This ‘narrative impulse’ in Thomas, although obviously present in earlier works such as *The Minister* and ‘Border Blues’ (*PS*, 9-13), seems to have been further released by his retirement from the Church. *Between Here and Now* and *Ingrowing Thoughts* can be read as commentaries on the narrative conventions of painting, while the poems/ prose passages in *The Echoes Return Slow* and the poems in *Counterpoint* only really make sense within a narrative framework, autobiographical in the first volume (whether primarily spiritual or psychological) and eschatological in the second. We must also consider the title poem of *Mass for Hard Times*, a poem which obviously uses liturgical narrative as its organising principle. This principle is used again in ‘Bleak Liturgies’ (*MHT*, 63) and ‘Sonata in X’, the concluding poem in *Mass for Hard Times* (*MHT*, 81-5). ‘Sonata in X’ is obviously a type of narrative poem, as it ‘traces’ man’s intellectual, spiritual and emotional *development*.

eschatologically-premised totality, so Volk-Birke's hypothesis that only three poems within the collection (the ninth, the eighteenth and the twentieth) 'include, if only very tentatively, an eschatological aspect' is somewhat erroneous.<sup>47</sup>

The volume opens not with the first poem but with the letters 'BC.', written in bold and standing alone like a bleak, prehistoric obelisk, in a white surround of page. There also seems an orchestral element to this pictorial—or even filmic—as well as linguistic device; we can, for example, imagine the 'non-counterpointed' granite-hard opening chords of a minimalist symphony. The overall tone of visual, sonic and *imaginative* beginning is further intensified by the first line we read: 'This page should be left blank' (C, 8). Language and sound ('the abominable footprints') immediately imprint themselves upon the unsullied paper. The second stanza's 'personalized' appeal to the reader emphasizes that what will follow necessitates his creative co-operation:

If you can imagine a brow puckered  
before thought, imagine this page  
immaculately conceived  
in the first tree, with man rising  
from on all fours endlessly to begin  
puckering it with his language.

The theological themes which the volume will later engage—the poisoned fruit of Eden, The Fall of Man, the Nativity (and Thomas alludes both in this poem and in later ones to the Virgin as the 'Immaculate Conception') and the 'rise' to redemption—are all foreshadowed here. What is most noticeable, however, is that aurally suggestive verb at the beginning of the final

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<sup>47</sup> 'World History from BC to AD: R. S. Thomas' *Counterpoint*', 222.

line: ‘puckering’. Of course, the tense change from past to present (‘puckered’-‘puckering’) provides a sense of movement and therefore signals the commencement of the volume’s narrative-driven theme. On the other hand, within the *specific* context of the line, the verb seems to transmit additional connotations of both ‘naming’ and ‘gathering’. To ‘pucker’ is also to ‘group together’, to ‘collect’ or to ‘congregate’, so in this sense the line indicates that the first man, like Adam in his pre-lapsarian state, is compelled to give ‘names’ to that which he sees around him.<sup>48</sup> Man feels urgently *driven* to ‘name’. Man’s first conscious actions are actions of ostensive description—man ‘puckers’ his brow in thought and pronounces, ‘this and this are *that*’—thus, man is ‘gathering’ his thoughts *through* the act of naming. If this is correct, then it follows that the verb is crucially double-edged. Language ‘puckers’ or ‘wrinkles’/ ‘defaces’ reality (‘puckering’ is also perhaps evocative of ‘pock-marking’), but language correspondingly *constructs* reality. We cannot understand reality unless we possess a conceptual-linguistic framework by means of which reality can be interpreted. The line seems to imply that, despite what the empiricists may argue, the mind is not *tabula rasa*. Language develops in *parallel* with consciousness, and naming is the primary action which underpins all conscious thought. There are also the verb’s connotations of playfulness and acoustic ‘liveliness’ to consider. Man ‘puckishly’ inaugurates his acts of naming and so man’s first actions are buoyant, spirited, animated. By bestowing names upon that which he sees about him, man happily ‘puckers’ the hitherto unknown and amorphous landscape; he imposes *his* vision, *his* logic, *his* language, onto reality. The choric variability of man’s puckering chatter in this poem provides sharp counterpoint, so to speak, to the steady and relentless bass notes of the ‘BC’ opening chord. Man is presented as an intensely imaginative and resourceful creature. Although man’s impertinence will lead to the Fall, God bequeaths to man the imaginative and intellectual capacities with which to redeem himself. It is this chronicling of

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<sup>48</sup> Genesis 2: 20.

man's imaginative and intellectual pilgrimage from presumption and hopelessness to atonement and exultation, which is *Counterpoint's* underlying structural dynamic.

It is worth mentioning Sabine Volk-Birke's interpretation of the book's architecture, which is quite different to that proposed here. Volk-Birke argues that the sonnet form which both opens and closes the volume,

emphasizes not only the coherence of the poems, but also the relatedness of history from the beginning to the present, and, possibly to a hopeful ending. The fact that the restrained optimism of the last two poems is expressed in two quartets and two tercets respectively indicates that wholeness and completeness are no longer simply given [...] A reliable relation of promise and fulfilment, as it is represented by Old and New Testament, time BC and time AD, can no longer be established. Likewise, apocalypse and redemption have been questioned. Eternity is unimaginable to the human mind and can be found for the persona merely in the belief that his own spiritual quest has not failed.<sup>49</sup>

This analysis, however, does not appear to chime too euphoniously with the structural framework decided upon by Thomas. If Thomas were simply declaring that all we may hope for is some sort of spiritual perseverance, then why the clear and obvious *progression* from 'BC' to 'AD'? Salvation has *already* been won—'O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?', as Paul famously phrases it (1Corinthians, 15: 55)—so unless Thomas is being heavily ironic *throughout* the volume, it seems unlikely that he believes in the sort of 'gloomy optimism' imputed to him by Volk-Birke. The salient point is surely this: although the persona at the beginning of the volume has not yet heard Christ's promise of eternal life, we, as readers

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<sup>49</sup> 'World History from BC to AD: R. S. Thomas' *Counterpoint*', 225.

of the volume, certainly *have* heard it; thus, the entire book is dependent on our prior knowledge of how the narrative of man's Fall from Grace actually *concludes*. If this is the case, then it is perfectly possible to argue that Thomas is not embracing any sort of existential despondency *himself*, but is investigating the reasons *why* such despondency may occur.

The relationship between human language and God's 'hypostatic' self-expression is a major theme throughout *Counterpoint*. Indeed, much of the imagery in the second and third poems of the 'BC' sequence is indicative of further, acoustic effervescence: 'in the beginning was silence/ that was broken'; 'Hush: the sound of a bird'; 'practice of Ur-language'; 'An echo/ in God's mind'; 'The sound of a rib'; 'The mumbling/ of the Host'; 'sparrows/ lifted their voices'; 'The lonely/ ones sang'; 'The frost/ chirruped'; 'the nightingales sing'. It is possible that this early emphasis on sonic receptivity prefigures the volume's later preoccupation with God's ostensible 'silence'. There is also a potential association with the book's cover, which shows a painting by Vermeer of a young woman weighing gold, although with the pans of her scale empty. The canvas could be interpreted as a visual metaphor for the well-known aphorism, 'speech may be silver but silence is golden'. As silence cannot 'literally' be spoken, it must be quantified according to a separate system of weights and measurements. This may seem a rather unconvincing connection, but we know from the two ekphrastic volumes that Thomas certainly knew how to interpret and 'disrupt' a picture's narrative current, so to say that the volume's theme of deific silence has *no* connection with the cover, is perhaps more critically tenuous than the assertion to the contrary. In continuation of this idea, the 'balancing of silence' trope is used explicitly in the fourth poem of the 'Crucifixion' sequence: 'Silent, Lord/ as you would have us be,/ lips closed, eyes swerving aside/ towards the equation:/  $x + y^2 = y + x^2$ ?/ It does not balance'.

The second poem of the volume draws an explicit connection between God's initial 'silence' and the incarnated Word which will presently follow: 'in the beginning was silence/



that was broken by the word' (C, 9). The eighth poem, the 'central poem of the first part' according to Volk-Birke,<sup>50</sup> returns to the 'God without being' motif of earlier collections:

I know him.

He is the almost anonymous,

the one with the near perfect

alibi, the face over us that lacks

nothing but an expression [...]

He acknowledges

our relationship in the modes of thought

repudiating, when we would embody

thought in language, a syntactical

compulsion to incorporate

him in the second person.

In this poem, bristling with allusion, puns, and ironic turnarounds of thought and image, we witness the mature Thomas at his linguistically-artful best. The emphatic testimony of recognition in the opening line is modified by the adverbs 'almost' and 'near', and then seemingly reversed altogether by the multi-layered pun on 'expression': God is inscrutable; He lacks a method of expressing Himself; He seems to resist *our* attempts at expressing *Him*.<sup>51</sup> The second, stanza, however, provides firm rebuttal of the opening stanza's diction of taciturnity and impenetrability. God recognizes our connection to Him through the 'modes', or modalities, of our religious thought and, as we have seen, the most important theological

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 208.

<sup>51</sup> The poem's metaphors of elusiveness and detection are clearly redolent of 'He is his own/ spy' (ERS, 113).

‘modality’ of all according to Thomas, is the ‘expression’ of divinity through the synthesis of apophatic and cataphatic predication. By recognising that the (apophatic) ‘failure’ of theological predication is the *best* way of (cataphatically) expressing God, we are able to verbalise God *and* emancipate religious thinking from ontological distortion. God repudiates our attempts to metaphysically ‘embody’ or ‘incorporate’ Him—and the classically-trained Thomas would have known full well that ‘incorporate’ is derived from ‘corpus’—but the destruction of the ‘God as being’ archetype, as many of poems in *Destinations* and especially *Experimenting with an Amen* attest, is precisely that which releases *mature* understanding of God. Divinity cannot be grasped through the application of second-person ascriptions; we remember, for example, the contemptuous dismissal of those who persist in ‘apostrophising/ the deity: O Thou’ in ‘Andante’, (*EA*, 61). The dexterous enjambements from ‘embody’ to ‘thought’ and ‘syntactical’ to ‘compulsion’, re-emphasize that God is ‘beyond’ ontological predication and that, if we wish to understand God’s ‘non-metaphysical’ nature, then we need to eliminate the anthropomorphic impulse (God as ‘You’) from our theology. The shift in tone prompts us to reconsider Thomas’s depiction of God in the opening stanza, with the enjambement from ll. 4-5 now seeming to convey a somewhat hefty irony: ‘the face over us that lacks/ nothing’. Nothing *is* lacking, for we are able to perceive the truth of God the moment we cease our playing of the ‘anthropomorphic game’. Additionally, since God is pure thought—‘creation by divine mind’, *C*, 8; ‘An echo/ in God’s mind’, *C*, 9; ‘Who can read God’s mind?’, *C*, 12; ‘There is a being, they say,/ neither body nor spirit’, *C*, 20—to attempt the ‘expression’ and therefore the ‘embodiment’ of God’s thoughts is as blasphemous as it is pointless. It is God who will embody, through Christ, *His* thoughts in language—‘In the beginning was the Word’—and, since Christ is the ‘second person’ in the Trinity, Christ is the *literal* ‘embodiment’ of deific thoughts. The corpse of the Son, to put it another way,

‘incorporates’ all we need to know regarding the salvific plan of the Father.<sup>52</sup>

Humanity’s egotistical Protagoreanism—‘There is no Trinity/ in a glass. The self looks at the self/ only and tenders its tribute’ (C, 11)—is examined further, and perhaps even parodied, in the splintered syntax of the eleventh poem:

I want... Help me. Listen...I —  
 no time. What is life but  
 deciduous? That I in my day, no  
 other... I, I, I, before the world,  
 in the present tense; so, now,  
 here, stating my condition —  
 who else? (C, 18)<sup>53</sup>

The steady note of the introductory chord is counterpointed once again by the uncertain ‘puckering’ of human speech. We desire unity with Godhead, but our narcissistic instinct bolts firm all exits from selfhood’s hall of mirrors:

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. Volk-Birke: ‘The eighth poem [...] reduces the affirmative statement of the first line “I know him” to absurdity, as it describes God in terms of absence, distance, and invisibility [...] Significantly [there] is a blank space between the octet and the three tercets, flanked on either side by God conceived as a mist that disintegrates and a being that escapes into a black hole. At the centre there is only nothingness’. ‘World History from BC to AD: R. S. Thomas’ *Counterpoint*’, 208. One perceives here the defectiveness of the ‘God as being’ exegetical method. Because Volk-Birke assumes that Thomas *does* conceive of God in metaphysical terms—despite his various assertions to the contrary—she makes no mention of the clear rejection of the ontological archetype in the poem’s second stanza. Therefore, Volk-Birke does not seem to appreciate that the second stanza, as is customary in a ‘sonnet’, reverses the argument contained within the octave.

<sup>53</sup> The poem may have been influenced by ‘Wodwo’, the title poem of Ted Hughes’s 1967 collection. In this poem the ‘wodwo’, tentatively and falteringly, commences the exploration of his own consciousness. There may also be a structural influence on *Counterpoint* as a whole, as *Wodwo* is Hughes’s only collection in which poems and prose pieces are grouped into sections as part of the narrative of a ‘single adventure’, as Hughes himself described it (Ted Hughes, *Wodwo* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), author’s note). The first section of the book describes what exists before an event, the second comprises the stories constituting this event, and the third portrays the aftermath of the event; thus, the structure of the text is firmly teleological. For more on Hughes’s possible influence on Thomas see chapter one, n. 40.

Not my fault; I  
 at the centre, everything else  
 echoes, reflections. What is water  
 but mirror, air but returner  
 of the personal cadenza I...  
 I... I — What is my name?<sup>54</sup>

We, the poem seems to argue, are fighting our own ‘non-being’ by misguidedly combating virtuousness: ‘There will be no peace in the world/ so long as the angel resists me’. The music of the angelic choirs is counterpointed by humanity’s conceited presumption. Our egocentric yearning to play our solo part, our ‘cadenza’, in the music of creation, obscures the truth that we are also *part* of the divine symphony. The ‘present tense’ is not the nucleus of existential authenticity—as in the first volume of ekphrastic verse, we are *between* the ‘hic et nunc’—for even within the supposedly padlocked certainties of the current moment we are still deficient in existential certitude: ‘What is my name?’<sup>55</sup> In this poem, although we possess language, we cannot even obtain an appropriate term for self-definition; as the Psalmist writes, ‘Save me, O

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<sup>54</sup> Volk-Birke assumes that the speaker of the poem is God. She describes the deity depicted in the poem as ‘a vain and selfimportant being’ ‘World History from BC to AD: R. S. Thomas’ *Counterpoint*, 208. If this is true, however, then it becomes difficult to tally the poem’s tenor of seeking and indecision with the following poem’s ‘counter’-tenor (to continue the musical allusions) of confidence and authority: ‘God smiled. The controls/ were working: the small/ eaten by the large, the large/ by the larger’ (C, 19).

<sup>55</sup> The clause is obviously reminiscent of the various ways in which ‘existential anxiety’ is explored in *Neb*, although here it would perhaps be prudent to separate the linguistic *method* of the text from its central themes. If Thomas’s conception of deity is ‘non-ontological’ and if the ‘search’ for deity is his over-riding preoccupation, then it is possible to argue that the passages dealing with religious themes in *Neb* are not really about ‘deity’ at all, but concern how man’s conceptions of deity *distort* religious truth: ‘For R. S., as he grew older, it became obvious that many of the problem of religion arise in the wake of erroneous ideas concerning God, which cause us to ask erroneous questions. Our image of God must be transformed’. *Autobiographies*, 107. The purely *literary* architecture of *Neb*—the use of the third person; the transformation of the ‘central character’ into ‘R.S.’ at around the mid-way point of text and so on—does not necessarily mean that Thomas *himself* is as existentially bewildered as his ‘protagonist’. By way of comparison, Peter Wolfe, in a review of Graham Greene’s second volume of autobiography, *Ways of Escape* (1980), wondered if Greene—another writer of supposed religious ‘heterodoxy’ and one who was also often accused of personal ‘elusiveness’—‘isn’t planting road markers next to his tracks rather than covering them’. ‘Ways of Escape’, in *Modern Fiction Studies* 27 (1981): 706-8. It is certainly possible to hold that, in *Neb*, Thomas is engaged in a similar project. He is not being purposefully recondite, but selects to use literary methods which actually ‘signpost’ his spiritual progression.

God, by *thy* name' (54: 1). The text seems to propose that our *real* intellectual quest is to plumb our metaphysical depths by firstly demolishing our solipsistic core. As the earlier poem 'The Prisoner' (*LS*, 52) has it, we need to 'give birth/ to the larger vision.' It is imperative that we set alight 'the bush of the imagination' (*C*, 21) if we are to escape the destructive confines of narcissism and experience God's salvific grace. God has not 'absconded' Himself from anything; rather, it is *we* who must 'abscond' ourselves from our conceited belief that the detection of selfhood is a purely individualistic enterprise.

The 'INCARNATION' section begins with a poem, perhaps indebted to Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi', which also elucidates the ways in which we supplant religious truth with egotistical and solipsistic compulsions.<sup>56</sup> Instead of 'living with' the crucified Christ, as Paul recommends,<sup>57</sup> we request of Christ that He prove His divinity: "If you were so clever/ as to invent me, come down/ now so that I may believe" (*C*, 24). The obvious reference to Matthew 27: 40 shows that, once more, Thomas is expressing our entrenched egocentrism and theological blindness. Despite the blood-soaked evidence of Golgotha, we still desire (blasphemous) confirmation of God's commitment to the world.<sup>58</sup>

The second poem in the section contrasts our avaricious ambitions with deific magnanimity: 'Was there a resurrection?' [...]/ On the skyline I have seen gantries/ with their

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<sup>56</sup> The Eliotian parallels are interesting. Thomas's poem commences with the Magi observing the new-born Christ, then, in the third and fourth quatrains, there is biting condemnation of those who seek to replace the Incarnation with pseudo-spiritualism: 'You should have returned to your glass/ ball, that had other futures/ to betoken than the one/ you became part of, a listener// to its sermons, participant/ in the miracles it performed'. In Eliot's poem, the Incarnation has shattered the speaker's belief in the power of magic and astrology: 'this Birth was/ Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, or death./ We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,/ But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,/ With an alien people clutching their gods./ I should be glad of another death'. Although the speaker in Eliot's poem has experienced the death of his old belief-system, he fully accepts the 'belief-system' heralded by the Incarnation. In Thomas's poem, the speaker at the end of the text questions the validity of the entire Christian belief-system. Cf. Colossians 2: 20 which 'counterpoints' the Incarnation with pre-Incarnation paganism. Cf. also the uncollected poem from 1996, 'Story' (*UP*, 156), which begins 'They had come all that way—/for what?' The lines here are also reminiscent of the final stanza of Eliot's poem: 'were we led all that way for/ Birth or Death?'

<sup>57</sup> Galatians 2: 20: 'I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me'.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Deuteronomy 6: 16, 'Ye shalt not tempt [put to the test] the Lord your God', which is quoted by Christ in Matthew 4: 7 and Luke 4: 13.

arms out awkwardly/ as love and money trying to be reconciled' (C, 25).<sup>59</sup> Again, humanity is portrayed as theologically visionless: the arms of the Cross are open in welcome, but we lack the existential courage to return the embrace. The third poem, another apparently 'ekphrastic' text although the painting is unspecified,<sup>60</sup> appears to metamorphose the traditional Nativity scene into a foretelling of the Virgin's sorrow:

How old at the centre  
 the child's face gazing  
 into love's too human  
 face, like one prepared  
 for it to have its way  
 and continue smiling? (C, 26)

The child's 'way' is, ultimately, to 'be about [his] Father's business' (Luke 2: 49); thus, the 'way' will terminate at Golgotha. The 'way' could additionally refer to the 'Way' or 'Stations' of the Cross—Christ meets his mother at the fourth Station, for example—and therefore the lines may allude to Simeon's prediction to Mary: 'a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also' (Luke 2: 35). The narrative of the Incarnation 'encompasses', as it were, the narrative of the Crucifixion: 'the child lay/ with its acorn eye// that secreted the tree/ they would hang his body on' (C, 27); 'the smile of the Christ child was of its cross' (C, 56). These metaphors clearly denote the eternal *and* the temporal nature of the Incarnation. Once more, Thomas employs images and themes of 'symbiosis' to generate his poetry.

The theme of the 'future' sealed inside the 'present' is also expounded in the fifth poem

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<sup>59</sup> This trope was reused in a later poem: 'I stare into distance:/ nothing but the gantries/ where art is crucified in/ the cause of new art'. 'The computer is unable' (UP, 172).

<sup>60</sup> This is merely an assumption. The 'painting', of course, could well be Thomas's imaginative reconstruction of several different pictures.

of the sequence 'No clouds overhead' (C, 28).<sup>61</sup> On this occasion, however, Thomas's 'iconographical' representation of the Nativity scene accentuates Christ's role as the 'New Adam', and his mother's role as the 'New Eve', within the salvific narrative: 'This is Eden/ over again. The child/ holds out both his hands/ for the breast's apple. The snake is asleep'. Volk-Birke comments that 'As part of human and divine history [...] it [the poem] is defective. The real significance of the incarnation lies in exactly those associations which are absent here, namely the fall which needs redemption on the cross.'<sup>62</sup> The problem with this argument is that the Fall is *also* 'Felix Culpa'—'O happy fault that merited such and so great a Redeemer', as the Exsultet of the Easter Vigil has it—so once more Volk-Birke appears to be disregarding the narrative/ eschatological foundations of the volume. The symbiosis of past-present-future in the third and fifth poems of the 'INCARNATION' sequence is similar to Thomas's assertion in *The Echoes Return Slow* that 'eternity', if correctly understood, saturates the 'present': 'You have to imagine/ a waiting that is not impatient/ because it is timeless' (ERS, 81). That Thomas *did* believe in the truth of the Incarnation there is no doubt. Apart from the evidence of the poetry, we can refer to the end of the 1959 essay 'The Qualities of Christmas'. In this text he quotes from Hardy's 'The Oxen', 'I should go with him in the gloom,/ Hoping it might be so', and attaches to the lines an emphatic declaration of belief: 'But it is so.'<sup>63</sup>

The next poem, which contains the only example of concrete verse to be found within Thomas's entire oeuvre, 'counterpoints' the serenity and contentment of 'No clouds overhead' with an antithetical dialectic of anarchy and desolation:

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<sup>61</sup>The poem was first published as 'Mother and Child' in *Destinations*, 26. This text also seems to read 'ekphrastically', although, as is the case with the earlier poem, the painting is unspecified.

<sup>62</sup>'World History from BC to AD: R. S. Thomas' *Counterpoint*', 210.

<sup>63</sup>*Selected Prose*, 59.





heareth my voice’, and Pilate’s famously contemptuous dismissal: ‘*Quid est veritas?*’ (John 18: 37-8).<sup>64</sup> Satan, as Christ tells us in the same Gospel, is the ‘father of lies’ (8: 44), so in this sense the poem is not ‘the negation of the Biblical account [...] because no God has become man’, as Volk-Birke maintains,<sup>65</sup> but an argument for rejecting the easy pathways of secular ‘truth’. The poem indicates that we should embrace, rather than repudiate, the complex—and ostensibly contradictory—ruthless facts and harsh theologies of the eschatological narrative.

The reference to Yeats would support such an interpretation of the text. The fourth section of ‘Under Ben Bulbin’, from which the line is taken, concerns the different ways in which Quattrocento art may bring ‘the soul of man to God’.

Quattrocento put in paint  
 On backgrounds for a God or Saint  
 Gardens where a soul's at ease;  
 Where everything that meets the eye,  
 Flowers and grass and cloudless sky,  
 Resemble forms that are or seem  
 When sleepers wake and yet still dream.  
 And when it's vanished still declare,  
 With only bed and bedstead there,

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<sup>64</sup> Pilate is alluded to again in the final stanza of ‘‘Make my voice sharp’ (C, 49):

On a bone  
 altar, with radiation  
 for candle, we make sacrifice  
 to the god of quasars  
 and pulsars, wiping  
 our robotic hands clean  
 on a disposable conscience.

Here, mankind has substituted the eternal truth of deific revelation with the provisional and therefore self-deluding ‘truths’ of scientific rationalism.

<sup>65</sup> ‘World History from BC to AD: R. S. Thomas’ *Counterpoint*’, 210.

That heavens had opened.

Art provides us with access to truth but the artist—whether visual or literary—must of course select and then fashion his material. The artist must entertain a *totality* of vision if his art is to be deemed successful, and that in itself demands the continuous sharpening *of* that vision. We need time, tutelage, practice and self-instruction, in order to *see* the eternal truths of the Incarnation. The seventh poem, for example, castigates those who rush ‘too speedily’ (C, 30) into theological judgment, while the eighth acknowledges that ‘wisdom must come on foot’ (C, 31).

The contention that the intellect must be recalibrated for it to understand the *correct* relationship between God and the Christ-Child is also proposed in the tenth poem. This text contrasts the Word made Flesh with man’s developing self-awareness: ‘Other incarnations, of course,/ consonant with the environment/ he finds himself in,/ animating the cells,/ sharpening the antennae’ (C, 33). Volk-Birke makes the rather peculiar assumption that the pronouns here refer to God.<sup>66</sup> The metaphors of tentative exploration, however, are surely connected to the eleventh poem in the ‘BC.’ section and, in that sense, ‘Other incarnations’ may be linked thematically to the final poem in ‘INCARNATION’ where the speaker acknowledges the lacunae in his religious understanding: ‘I have been student of your love/ and have not graduated. Setting/ my own questions, I bungled/ the examination: Where? Why? When?’ (C, 34).<sup>67</sup> The delightful pun on ‘crib’ in the last line of the poem, noted by several scholars,<sup>68</sup> re-accentuates the need for painstaking self-tutelage and self-examination: ‘incarnations’ of

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<sup>66</sup> ‘God permeates matter and life even in its primitive form, so that the small basic parts even become conscious of their existence and “learn to confront/ the intellect with its issue”’. Ibid., 211.

<sup>67</sup> The theme of existential bewilderment is also central to ‘Beauty is ill’, the seventeenth poem in the ‘AD.’ section: [...] ‘How can I/ find God? Out there?/ He is absent. In here?/ He is dumb [...] Who am I?/ the commodities ask/ our vocabulary, outdistancing/ it, on their way where?’ C, 58.

<sup>68</sup> Tony Brown, *Bulletin of the Welsh Academy*, 13; Damian Walford Davies, “‘Double-entry Poetics’: R. S. Thomas—Punster”, 168; Volk-Birke, 213; William J. McGill, *Poet’s Meeting: George Herbert, R. S. Thomas, and the Argument with God*, 175.

thought ('other incarnations') are required if we wish to understand divinity correctly. If one responds to erroneous questions, then it is hardly surprising if one finds oneself deficient in theological knowledge: 'Time and again I was/ caught with a crib up my sleeve'.

The short 'CRUCIFIXION' section of the volume opens with a four stanza poem portraying God's unshakable devotion to His eschatological plan. The opening stanza uses the motif of God as cosmic ironist, with the crucified Christ performing the role of 'God's jester/ capering at his right hand' (C, 36).<sup>69</sup> The interpretative lever to the stanza, and to the entire poem, is the adjective 'impassible' in the fourth line. This is an explicitly theological term and one which, as far as I am aware, has hitherto escaped exegesis. 'Impassibility' is the theological doctrine that God cannot experience pain or pleasure from the actions of another being. Consequently, by describing God's supposed attribute of impassibility as 'fallacious' in the third line, Thomas is obviously asserting that God does *indeed* suffer. Given the theological edicts of the 'hypostatic union', it is even possible that Thomas is saying God *must* suffer if He is 'cognate', as it were, with the crucified Christ. Through the nexus of Incarnation and Crucifixion God has *chosen* to restrict his omnipotence: 'the fallacy/ of the impassible, reminding/ him of omnipotence's limits'. Hence, the poem does not appear to foreground 'the theme of God's limited power', as Volk-Birke contends,<sup>70</sup> but God's unswerving commitment to the soteriological mission of Christ.<sup>71</sup> It is not God's omnipotence or omniscience which Thomas is considering but His omnibenevolence and, if that is the case, then the opening image of Christ as 'God's fool' becomes charged with theological optimism. Christ 'in torment' provides irrefutable evidence of John's commanding maxim *Deus est caritas*. Christ at the

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<sup>69</sup> Volk-Birke believes that the opening stanza 'alludes to the convict crucified on Christ's right who repents and is promised paradise, but [the stanza] turns the biblical scene into a negative event: the person at God's right is a fool, the court jester of the king, whose capers signify torment and who cannot be helped'. 'World History from BC to AD: R. S. Thomas' *Counterpoint*', 214. This reading is of course possible but, given that Christ, as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed informs us, 'is seated at the right hand of the Father', it seems far more likely that Thomas is referring to the Resurrected Jesus.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>71</sup> It could also be argued that by underlining the 'changeability' of deific attributes, Thomas is once more disputing the theological soundness of the 'God as being' archetype.

point of death is the Suffering Servant of Psalm 22, yet God too is experiencing terrifying anguish and loss: 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son' (John 3: 16). Interpreted in this manner, the third stanza's reference to 'beloved irony' seems powerfully twofold. Little could be more 'ironic' than the omnipotent God crucifying Himself so that men might live,<sup>72</sup> and Christ, the 'conduit' through which God's 'ironic' narrative of salvation is conveyed, is truly 'beloved' by His Father: 'Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased' (Mark 1: 11). Moreover, if Christ is 'God's fool' and *our* mission, as Peter informs us, is to 'follow his steps' (1 Peter 2: 21), then we too must attempt to develop the spiritual attribute of 'foolishness' if we are to become truly Christian: 'We are fools for Christ's sake, but ye are wise in Christ' (1 Corinthians 4: 10).<sup>73</sup>

The second poem in the sequence invites us to uncouple faith from needless theological

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<sup>72</sup> Cf. 2 Corinthians 5: 15; 1 Thessalonians 5: 10; 1 Peter 3: 18.

<sup>73</sup> The trope of 'foolishness' as the beginning of wisdom is also used in the first three tercets of *C*, 60:

Madness? Its power  
is to be recognised by the sane.  
The insane ignore it.

They are busy with shells,  
flowers, the difficulty  
of discovering whose face it is

grimacing at them in the mirror.  
There is no certainty  
that we die when we are dead.

Cf. 1 Corinthians 1: 18: 'For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God'. The presentation of Christ as a 'fool' is the thematic centre of 'Come Down' (*MHT*, 39): 'And this one came preaching/ the gospel of folly/ that man shall not live/ by bread only'. Cf. also the opening stanza of 'Covenanters' (*LP*, 170):

*Jesus*  
He wore no hat, but he produced, say  
from up his sleeve, an answer  
to their question about  
the next life. It is here,  
he said, tapping his forehead  
as one would to indicate an idiot.

Thomas's fondness for presenting Christ as a kind of scarecrow may be seen as variation on the Pauline directive to become holy or blessed 'fools', as the rags of the scarecrow could also represent the tattered clothing of the anchorite. Cf. also 'Court Order' (*EA*, 42) which contrasts April Fools' Day with the 'foolishness' of Good Friday, an event in the liturgical calendar which is celebrated either at the end of March or the beginning of April.

machinery. The first stanza, commencing with a reference to the Resurrection, immediately switches focus to the Crucifixion: 'Not the empty tomb/ but the uninhabited/ cross' (C, 37).<sup>74</sup> The suggestion here is that we have lost sight of the eschatological narrative. The Cross may be unoccupied, but that is only because we have supplanted the Passion with dreary and mechanistic hypothesizing:

We have over-furnished  
 our faith. Our churches  
 are as limousines in the procession  
 towards heaven. But the verities  
 remain: a de-nuclearised  
 cross, uncontaminated  
 by our coinage; the chalice's  
 ichor; and one crumb of bread  
 on the tongue for the bird-like  
 intelligence to be made tame by.

Reminiscent of those texts in *The Echoes Return Slow* which propose that the Passion must be lived rather than 'analysed',<sup>75</sup> the poem argues that man must cease his intellectual hithering and thithering and place all his trust in the simple sovereignty of the Eucharist.<sup>76</sup> We must teach ourselves to understand that the blood of Christ has not only washed away the Abrahamic

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<sup>74</sup> The narrative transposition of Crucifixion and Resurrection in the first three lines makes us recall the final stanza of 'What I ask of humans' (ERS, 61), where the imagery progresses in the more 'expected' manner: 'While he, // who is called God, now/ scorches with sparks of/ blood, now glaciates me/ in the draught of his tomb'. Thomas presents different responses to the *same* occurrence, thereby emphasizing the necessity for intellectual revitalization in religious understanding.

<sup>75</sup> For example, ERS, 97, 103, 115.

<sup>76</sup> There is also a political dimension to the poem, as the striking image of the 'churches/ [...] as limousines' suggests that Thomas is castigating a church more concerned with material goods than with the saving of souls.

requirement to appease God—the theme of the second stanza of ‘Other incarnations’—but has also transcribed a completely *new* theology, and one both radical and dynamic in its minimalism. Whereas Abraham sacrificed the ram, we must sacrifice our compunction to ‘theorise’ the non-theoretical. Man proposeth but God disposeth, for to understand the Eucharist does not require ‘analysis’ (‘Revision’, *EA*, 35) but perseverance, praxis, and commitment.<sup>77</sup>

‘Silent, Lord’ (*C*, 39), the penultimate poem in the ‘CRUCIFIXION’ sequence, draws together the previous themes of soteriology, deific ‘silence’, and the need to imaginatively ‘reconfigure’ theological truth as a prerequisite to *experiencing* theological truth. In this context, it is worth emphasizing once again that there is nothing ‘negative’ in the idea that religious knowledge advances by means of paradigmatic reorientation. As John Goldingay, using a quotation from Heidegger for support, writes in his analysis of Scriptural ‘canonicity’:

A crisis of paradigm is not a negative moment in the development of theology but a positive one. Indeed, “the real ‘movement’ of the sciences takes place when their basic concepts undergo a more or less radical revision that is transparent to itself. The level that a science has reached is determined by how far it is *capable* of a crisis in basic concepts”.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Cf. J. Hillis Miller: ‘the Protestant reinterpretation of the Eucharist parallels exactly a similar transformation in literature. The old symbolism of analogical participation is gradually replaced by the modern poetic symbolism of reference at a distance. Like the Zwinglian Eucharist such symbols designate an absence, not a presence. They point to something which remains somewhere else, unpossessed and unattainable [...] God has become a *Deus absconditus*, hidden somewhere behind the silence of infinite spaces, and our literary symbols can only make the most distant allusions to him, or to the natural world which used to be his abiding place and home’. *The Disappearance of God*, 6. For several reasons this seems a remarkable over-simplification. The whole point of the Tetragrammaton, for instance, is to *avoid* ‘analogical participation’, but suffice it to say that Hillis Miller’s understanding of Protestant Eucharistic celebration is quite clearly the opposite of Thomas’s.

<sup>78</sup> *Models for Scripture* (William B. Eerdmans: Michigan/ Paternoster Press: Carlisle, 1994), 12. Emphasis in original. The Heidegger quotation is taken from *Being and Time*. By ‘sciences’ Heidegger also means the humanities, such as theology.

If any poem in the volume provides firm rejection of Geoffrey Hill's hypothesis that Thomas is a poet of 'sacramental nihilism' it is 'Silent, Lord'.<sup>79</sup> The text's clear and obvious foregrounding of the soteriological narrative delivers an unambiguous dismissal of scepticism's enticing assertions. The poem's dominant motif is the opposition between objective theological truth and man's disinclination to accept, or commit to, the *postulation* of objective theological truth. The opening lines recognize that God is 'silent' and that, since man is made in God's image and likeness, he too must be 'silent' in his worship: 'Silent, Lord,/ as you would have us be'. Almost immediately, however, the speaker begins to question the pre-lapsarian beginnings of the redemptive narrative: 'It does not balance./ What has algebra to do/ with a garden? Either/ they preceded it or came/ late'.<sup>80</sup> Post-lapsarian man feels irresistibly compelled to both distrust and defy the foundations of God's soteriological plan: 'The snake's fangs/ must have been aimed/ at a calculable angle/ against a possible refusal'. Nevertheless, the change of thought in the mid-way point of the text shows that man's religious confusion is a straightforward consequence of his epistemic egocentrism:

Or is it  
 man's mind is to blame,  
 spinning questions out of itself  
 in the infinite regress?  
 It is we gave the stars names,

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<sup>79</sup> 'R. S. Thomas's Welsh Pastoral', 48. Hill, commenting on 'Relay' (*LS*, 9), argues that the poem is 'a metaphor of the evolution of the varieties of human speech, and the evolution of the varieties of human speech understood as a metaphor for the coexistence of extinction and survival, of *perceptual entrapment* and an enduring kind of Bergsonian élan'. (54, my emphasis.) I may well be overlooking intricacies in Hill's argument, but if Thomas is saying, at least in part, that we are 'entrapped' by perception and that some form of Bergson's 'élan vital' is what *releases* us from such entrapment, then it is difficult to see how his overall philosophy of religion can be 'nihilistic', as Hill avers.

<sup>80</sup>The trope of mathematics 'destabilizing' the Genesis narrative was recycled in an uncollected poem of eight years later: 'And here the dream changes/ to nightmare, when the words/ that had been Eden's chorus/ became signs and equations'. 'Dreams', *UP*, 162.

yet already the Zodiac  
 was in place— prophesying,  
 reminding?

The metaphor of the stars confirms that objective truth certainly exists. Once more, the poet stresses that it is *our* propensity to fallaciously ‘name’ the ‘unnameable’ which forms the wellspring of our religious misconstructions. We tender erroneous questions because our *initial* conceptualizations of divinity are inaccurate. God is not ‘silent’ but must be discovered ‘*in* silence’, as the late uncollected poem ‘Everywhere’ (*UP*, 163) has it.<sup>81</sup> Although Pilate’s egotistic dismissal of truth is demonstrably false, we can only appreciate the harsh objectivity of religious truth if we expunge from our religious thinking those pseudo-questions which we so often use to buttress theological inquiries:

We close  
 our eyes when we pray  
 lest the curtain of tears  
 should come down on a cross  
 being used for the first time to prove  
 the correctness of a negation.

The ‘negation’ of divinity’s ‘*self*-negation’—God’s ‘denial’ of the deific ‘name’ in Exodus 3: 14; the ‘omnipotent’ Godhead suspending *Himself* on the Cross—is the *only* correct way to ‘think’ divinity. Nonetheless, as the logicians tell us, double negation will always yield a

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<sup>81</sup> The poem, first published in *The Reader* (Spring 1998), recasts the ‘God as celestial infinity’ images of ‘Silent, Lord’: ‘I realized the wideness/ of the sky was his face gazing;/ that the curvature of ocean/ was the emblem of a mind/ rounded like space yet always expanding,/ so the keeled stars could navigate him for ever’.



positive. What is required is the intellectual courage to perceive that ‘negativity’ is not negative at all. We ‘close/ our eyes when we pray’ because we are *afraid* to embrace the terrible yet redemptive vision of Golgotha. In this reading, the poem is a continuation of the earlier volumes’ arguments that perceptual *rejuvenation* is the prerequisite to theological understanding. Man is *involuntarily* ‘blinded’ as a direct consequence of his replacement of theological truth with the distortive onto-theological paradigm. The ‘cross’ is only the Cross of Golgotha if it *is* ‘redemptive’, so clearly Thomas is not referring to the Cross itself but to our *conceptualizations* of the Cross— an entirely different matter. The negation of *all* deific predicates manufactures the ‘correct’ deific nomenclature. The crucified Christ is *both* finite and infinite, eternal and human, hypostasis and ekstasis. The Exodic ‘tautology’, ‘I am that I am’, must be understood as an expression of God’s dynamic commitment to creation. To quote Eckhart:

the repetition which says twice “I am who I am” is the purity of affirmation which excludes all negation [...] it indicates a specific effervescence (or bubbling over) or birth of self: this being, in fact, conceals a fervour which expands within itself and onto itself in a sort of bubbling; light within light, it penetrates everything.<sup>82</sup>

‘Light within light’ or, as the final two lines of the final poem in the ‘CRUCIFIXION’ section have it, ‘unfathomable/ darkness into unfathomable light’ (C, 40). This text accentuates once more the incongruous characteristics of man’s relationship with divinity. The representation of the Cross as a ‘decoy’ in the opening line is intentionally two-edged. The Cross both ‘entraps’ us—in the sense of ‘ensnaring’ us—and also ‘entices’ us, or ‘lures’ us

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<sup>82</sup> Meister Eckhart, *In Exodum* 3: 14, cited in Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana U. P., 2001), 36.

from theological truth. The appeal, as in several of the ‘CRUCIFIXION’ poems, is to recognise that whether or not we ‘accept’ the eternal sacrifice of Calvary is dependent on whether or not we are able to accurately *perceive* Calvary; to quote Eckhart once again, ‘the eye by which I see God and the eye by which God sees me are one and the same’.<sup>83</sup> It is not so much that Thomas is ‘questioning’ the redemptive narrative, but more that he wishes to reveal our theological myopia: ‘Forgive/ us the contempt our lenses/ breed is us’ as he writes in ‘Hebrews 12: 29’ (EA, 11) The ophthalmic-anchored image also appears in the opening poem in the ‘AD.’ section: ‘We must reverse our lenses’ (C, 42).<sup>84</sup> The victory at Calvary has been accomplished, yet all too often we abort our embryonic spiritual growth—our ‘incipient wings’, (ibid.)—because of a false and distortive literalism of perspective:

The way the brain resembles  
 a wood, impenetrable thicket  
 in which thought is held fast by the horns,  
 a sacrifice to language. (C, 43)

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<sup>83</sup> *Meister Eckhart: A Modern Translation*, Raymond Bernard Blakney (New York: Harper, 1941). Cited in Kearney, 36.

<sup>84</sup> The ‘counterpointing’ of spiritual growth with a kind of ‘reverse evolution’ in ‘We must reverse our lenses’ (‘We walk/ between blank walls, scrawled/ over with the graffiti/ of a species that has turned its gaze/ back in, not to discover/ its incipient wings, but the slime/ rather and the quagmire from which/ it believes itself to have emerged’) is reminiscent of the comparable dialectic of perceptual and intellectual *redevelopment* in ‘You have to imagine’ (ERS, 81):

You have to imagine  
 a waiting that is not impatient  
 because it is timeless. How long  
 from *habilis* to *erectus*  
 from the gill to the lung?  
 The eye closed and the dinosaurs  
 were no more.

In both poems, Thomas is obviously underscoring the fact that what we term ‘seeing’ is a complex and continually evolving process. Cf. also ll. 12-13 of ‘We must reverse our lenses’ with the concluding stanza of ‘Quest’, an uncollected poem from 1979: ‘So where you are, traveller./ is the best place, and inward not out/ your journey through dark ante-rooms/ of the species to where the self sits and waits’. (UP, 112).

Language may misrepresent truth, but it does not follow from this that language cannot also function as the means by which we *repossess* truth. The fourth poem in the ‘AD.’ sequence, for example, openly ‘counterpoints’ the thematic ‘negativity’ of the second:

The withholding  
 even of a request  
 that he remark my  
 silence: that was prayer.

I waited upon  
 him as a mirror  
 in its anonymity  
 waits upon absence. (C, 45)

In the same way that the mirror *may* disclose that which is true—‘There are// times even the mirror/ is misted as by one breathing/ over my shoulder’ (‘Retirement’, *EA*, 38)—the silent language of prayer, if correctly spoken, is still powerfully loquacious.<sup>85</sup> ‘Prayer’ as ‘To be alive then’ (C, 44) phrases it, is both ‘necessary’ *and* ‘impossible’, but to characterise divinity as the

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<sup>85</sup> The tropes of silence as allocution and mirrors as *also* ‘windows’ are combined in ‘The Presence’ (*BHN*, 107):

There is nothing I can do  
 but fill myself with my own  
     silence, hoping it will approach  
     like a wild creature to drink  
 there, or perhaps like Narcissus  
 to linger a moment over its transparent face.

The reference to the ‘after-draught// of the far-off’ in the third and fourth stanzas of ‘The withholding/ even of a request’, perhaps makes us recall the compelling portrayal of the Resurrection in ‘What I ask of humans’ (*ERS*, 61): ‘While he,// who is called God, now/ scorches with sparks of/ blood, now glaciates me/ in the draught out of his tomb’.

‘The eschaton [...] A possibility of the future to come, *impossible* in the present’ is, according to Richard Kearney, the very *definition* of Godhead.<sup>86</sup> Kearney continues his discussion of God as ‘the eschatological *persona* [...] the figure which transfigures by absenting itself’ by drawing a further distinction between ‘*persona*’ and ‘*prosopon*’:

For me it [*prosopopoeia*] signals the otherness of the other [...] *Prosopon* is the face of the other who urgently solicits me, bidding me answer in each concrete situation, “here I am” [*Prosopon-persona*] perfectly captures the double sense of someone as both proximate to me in the immediacy of connection and yet somehow ineluctably distant, at once incarnate and otherwise, inscribing the trace of an irreducible alterity in and through the face before me’.<sup>87</sup>

As was argued in chapter three, by using a controlling rhetoric of *prosopopoeia* in many of his religious poems, Thomas is able to preserve the ‘silence’ of God while simultaneously showing the volubility of deific silence.

Continuing the theme of Christian revelation as dependent on *self*-discovery, the fifth poem in the ‘AD.’ sequence makes explicit once more Thomas’s conviction that God, if properly comprehended, is the pseudo-Dionysian, silent yet prolix, ‘unnameable nameable’:

it accosts me  
in silence at every corner  
of my indifference, appealing  
to me to save it gratuitously  
from extinction [...]

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<sup>86</sup> *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*, 16-18. My emphasis.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

Must I single it with a name?  
 I am coming to believe,  
 as I age, so faithful its attendance  
 upon the eye's business, it is myself  
 I court. (C, 46)

As is the case with the previously referred to 'Everywhere', in this poem also God must be encountered '*in* silence'. The thematically significant preposition reinforces the need for conceptual and perceptual reorientation ('the *eye's* business') with regard to theological understanding.<sup>88</sup> It is superfluous to attempt the 'location' of God—by definition, 'the immensity/ of his being' (C, 45) obviates the need for detection—so what is really required is that we educate the mind to witness God through the suffering *and* silence of the Son: 'Jesus gave him no answer' (John 19: 19)/ 'he answered him nothing' (Luke 23: 9). Christ, God's 'icon', makes the distant intimate and the taciturn voluble. One who witnesses Christ as 'icon of the Father' is able to look further, and hear more acutely, than one who is transfixed by the *merely* visible and the *ostensibly* speechless. The crucified Christ 'points to' the invisible and silent Father; nevertheless, unless one firstly 'elevates' one's 'perceptions' with the aim of asserting that Christ *is* divine, the Father will forever remain inaccessible and uncommunicative. John D. Caputo phrases this epistemological argument splendidly:

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<sup>88</sup> Cf. the 'counterpointed' metaphors of conceptual and perceptual *bewilderment* in stanzas two to four of 'To be alive then':

The philosophers had done  
 their work well, demolishing  
 proofs we never believed in.

We were drifting in space-  
 time, in touch with what we had  
 left and could not return to.

We rehearsed the excuses  
 for the deficiencies of love's  
 kingdom, avoiding our eyebeams.

The Revelation [of the Transfiguration] is revelation that Jesus is the anointed one, not a revelation of the divinity, which no one can see and still live. The divinity is a matter of faith. By faith, we are given to believe that Jesus is divine, to intend Jesus as divine, but the divinity is not itself given. Even if you were standing right beside Jesus you would not see the divinity unless you believed it; and if you believed it, that is because you would not see it. You would believe it even though, indeed, in spite of the fact that you did not see it, which is what faith means.<sup>89</sup>

Faith in and *through* Christ, and especially faith in the Crucifixion where Christ suffers ‘completely’, as it were, the Father’s ‘distance’, is the glorification of God *as* and *through* ‘distance’; as St. John of the Cross writes, ‘without these distancings, souls would never learn to approach God’.<sup>90</sup> To maintain that postulations of deific ‘distance’—in the sense of distance as equivalent to ‘absence’—are the best that we can ever attain in our comprehension of divinity, is yet another illustration of self-refuting narcissism and the idolatrous ‘replacement’ of God with the purely human fabrication:

closing oneself off to distance, without being able to draw away from it, is what characterizes the idol, which can only be spotted the moment when, already, another gaze confounds it, simply because it transpierces it.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> ‘The Hyperbolization of Phenomenology: Two Possibilities for Religion in Recent Continental Philosophy’, 85.

<sup>90</sup> *Dark Night*, I. 14. The phrase is used by Marion as an epigraph to his chapter on Hölderlin in *The Idol and Distance*.

<sup>91</sup> *God Without Being*, 129.

These comments are made as part of Marion's analysis of the 'vanity' passage of Ecclesiastes. According to Marion, when Qoheleth, the 'philosopher' of Ecclesiastes, talks of human vanity, he is arguing that egotism is the frontrunner of idolatry. If we say that God 'cannot' be understood, then it must follow that God created us without the capacity to understand Him; however, this cannot be the case, since we have been made in 'God's image and likeness'. Therefore, by saying that knowledge of God is impossible, we are succumbing to the conceited and blasphemous presupposition that God's nature must be equivalent to our own. We are conjecturing, albeit unintentionally, that God must be somehow epistemically 'limited'. By utilizing an onto-theological paradigm as the basis of our religious understanding—'God's nature is impossible to decipher'—we *inevitably* distort our religious understanding.

It is the Son who 'confounds' and therefore teaches (or 'transpierces') our gaze, and the 'AD.' section of *Counterpoint* concludes with several poems which foreground Christ's 'iconicity' as that which both instructs and enlightens. The seventh poem, for example, 'counterpoints' the truth of the salvatory narrative with another caustic disparagement of our anthropomorphic compulsion ('An apparition in a tree/ as of a face watching us [...] For a being so large/ to play hide and seek!' C, 48).<sup>92</sup> The first stanza of 'But the silence in the mind' (C, 50), a stanza which refers explicitly to the forty-second Psalm, also seems to make reference to the Christic 'dialectic' as reciprocally prolix and inaudible: 'But the silence in the mind/ is when we live best, within/ listening distance of the silence/ we call God'.<sup>93</sup> Christ *is* sometimes

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<sup>92</sup> The final image quoted here—and, indeed, the theme of the poem itself—may have been inspired by stanza three of Saunders Lewis's 1936 poem 'The Blessed Sacrament':

For who in his right mind,  
Without another candle  
(O, Father of the lights)  
Would ever find you playing hide and seek, with your home  
In the guise  
Of wheat  
An insignificant particle amongst all the chaos?  
It's no wonder the children do not kneel to their missing Lord.

<sup>93</sup> The preliminary 'negativity' of the Psalm's images—'As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God [...] Where is thy God?'—is 'counterpointed' by the images in its final verse: 'Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him,

silent, ‘Jesus gave him no answer’, but the silence of the Word is also profoundly voluble: ‘If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free’ (John 8: 31-2). Superficially, the two Johannine texts provide sharp thematic ‘counterpoint’ to each other, but the correct understanding of Christ’s ‘iconicity of silence’ is precisely that which *empowers* silence to, ‘ensue so deliberately/ as to be taken for an Amen’ (C, 51).<sup>94</sup>

It is in this sense of Christ as ‘icon’ of deific truth that Thomas’s notorious remarks to John Ormond, ‘Christ was a poet, the New Testament is a metaphor, the Resurrection is a metaphor’, should be interpreted.<sup>95</sup> By accentuating the ‘non-literality’ of the Christic narrative, Thomas is able to circumvent the compulsion to ‘place’ Christ according to human taxonomy. At the same time, Thomas is also able to present us with a non-‘idolatrous’ phenomenology of theological language. ‘Metaphor,’ as Northrop Frye writes, ‘expresses an identity *with* that [...] not found in ordinary experience’.<sup>96</sup> Therefore, by ‘thinking’ Christ by means of metaphor or ‘iconicity’—and, to quote Colossians again, Christ as ‘icon of the invisible Father’ is obviously metaphorical—Thomas can assert the truths of man’s relationship *with* Christ whilst avoiding the ‘reduction’ of Christ by means of human nomenclature. As Thomas himself argued in the ‘Introduction’ to his selection of Herbert’s poetry:

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who is the health of my countenance, and my God’. The final stanza of the poem also ‘counterpoints’ the Kierkegaardian trope of the self as constituted by ‘fathoms’ with *The Listener* article trope of authentic journeying as stasis: ‘It is a presence, then,/ whose margins are our margins; that calls us out over our / own fathoms. What to do/ but draw a little nearer to/ such ubiquity by remaining still?’ Once more Thomas is at pains to accentuate that, since God has never ‘absented’ Himself, He does not need to be ‘found’.

<sup>94</sup> In continuation of the theme that deific ‘silence’ must be interpreted as voluble, the ‘AD.’ section works through a series of conspicuously ‘noisy’ metaphors (C, 53, ll. 5-8; C, 54, ll. 1-5; C, 59, ll. 10-12) before concluding with the more peaceful, ‘diminuendo’-like imagery of the two short, final poems.

<sup>95</sup> R. S. Thomas, Priest and Poet’. *Poetry Wales* (Spring) vol. 7, no. 4; 53.

<sup>96</sup> *Words with Power*, 78. Emphasis in original. Cf. Frye’s comments of the relationship between ‘spirit and symbol’ in the fourth chapter of his book: ‘The visionary tradition [...] the one running through the pseudo-Dionysius, laid a good deal of stress on the fact that God was a hid divinity, hidden because all language about such a being dissolves in paradox or ambiguity [...] Thus: there is no such thing as God, because God is not a thing. All language in such areas has to carry with it the sense of its own descriptive inadequacy, and nothing but the mythical and metaphorical language that says both “is” and “is not” can do this’. *Ibid.*, 109.



The bridge between [Christianity and poetry] is the Incarnation. If poetry is concerned with the concrete and particular, then Christianity aims at their redemption and consecration. The poet invents the metaphor, and the Christian lives it.<sup>97</sup>

Poetry, metaphor, iconicity, provide ‘a description of how the communication of religious experience *best* operates’.<sup>98</sup> This movement towards an ‘iconography’ of specifically *Christian* nomenclature is the central theme of ‘Under the Pharaohs it was power’ (C, 52) and ‘You show me two faces’ (C, 53). In the first poem, Thomas offers a thumbnail sketch of pre-Christian explorations for interiority and truth: ‘Under the Pharaohs it was power;/ backs broke under the stones [...] / At Delphi the power shifted/ to the mind’. In the central tercet, on the other hand, the pronoun ‘it’ is varnished with Christian implications:

In Judaea it was the beginning  
of an ability to play blind  
for tall stakes at the foot of the cross.

Whereas the Pharaohs constructed edifices to their own vanity and man’s interrogations of the Delphic oracle offered little more than self-reductive probing (‘the mind that gave uncomfortable/ answers to its own questions’), the sacrifice at Golgotha stimulates the commencement of an entirely different *manner* of thinking. Praxis as opposed to certitude is once more the keystone—we notice in particular the rhetorical sway of the noun ‘ability’—for if we desire *true* Christian understanding then we must firstly learn (‘the *beginning*/ of an

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<sup>97</sup> R. S. Thomas, Introduction to *A Choice of George Herbert’s Verse* (London: Faber & Faber, 1967), 15.

<sup>98</sup> *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, 9. My emphasis.

ability’) to ‘see through’ the ostensible ‘failure’ of the Christic mission.<sup>99</sup> Although they can physically see the crucified Christ, the gambling party at the foot of the Cross are actually visionless; ‘The gamblers/ at the foot of the unnoticed/ cross went on with/ their dicing’, as Thomas had earlier written in ‘Suddenly’ (*LS*, 32). Conversely, the pun on ‘blind’ in l. 8 suggests that faith is not so much the ‘unsighted’, ‘Kierkegaardian-like’ leap into the unknown, but rather the capacity to ‘see more’ than the *apparently* perceptible. We must study, in other words, the ‘iconography’ of Christ if we are to achieve authentic and lasting communion with the Father. Leonardo da Vinci, as the two final tercets maintain, most definitely could ‘see more’ than the immediately ascertainable (‘Leonardo possessed it’) but even here the ‘iconography’ of Christ has been displaced by an ‘idolatry’ of the clockwork universe in which Leonardo so passionately believed: ‘the smile of his Madonna// was a reflection of the smile/ on the countenance of the machine/ he was in adultery with’.

‘You show me two faces’ develops further this pivotal idea that authentic religious understanding is dependent on the ability to ‘see’. It is not so much that God has either ‘two faces’ or ‘two/ voices’, but more that *we* lack the conceptual capacity to *correctly* perceive Him:

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<sup>99</sup> The idea that genuine religious faith is dependent on ‘doing’ is obviously redolent of Thomas’s contention in ‘The Wood’ (*EA*, 16) that ‘pure being’, as he describes it there, must be ‘*come at*’. Cf. Leslie Griffiths, *The Far Side of the Cross, The Spirituality of R. S. Thomas* (Exeter: The Methodist Sacramental Fellowship, 1996), 8: ‘contemplation of the Cross can fill us with a sense of the enormity of God’s love and also the depth of human sin. But beyond such thoughts lies the awesome mystery of God’s *own being*. For the Cross is not simply a matter of what we see reflected either of God’s love or our own wickedness. Behind it, at its far side, in the stillness, absence, silence, darkness, under the cloud of our unknowing, is the realm of ultimate and boundless mystery’. My emphases. Cited in Alison Goodlad, *Leaving the Reason Torn: Re-thinking cross and resurrection through R. S. Thomas* (Edinburgh: Shoving Leopard, 2012), 92. Goodlad—who provides the quotation as part of a discussion on *Counterpoint*—paraphrases Griffiths’ comments thus: ‘This is not a God who is distant, in the sense of uncaring, but a God who has suffered for us in a way we cannot comprehend. This provides a different sort of distance, one of unknowing’. (Ibid.) Instead of recognising, as many of the poems in *Counterpoint* assert, that the ‘true’ appreciation of divinity is dependent upon praxis, both Griffiths and Goodlad seem to be capitulating to the ‘God as being’ archetype. Griffiths holds that whatever we term ‘God’ is equivalent to ‘ultimate and boundless mystery’ while Goodlad believes that deific ‘suffering’ and deific ‘distance’ are incomprehensible. Both these suppositions are premised on a straightforwardly ontological understanding of divinity; however, as Thomas’s conception of God is most definitely *not* ontological—‘this Being Who’s *not* a Being’—neither supposition appears to dovetail too tidily with considerable swathes of his religious verse.

Father, I said, domesticating  
 an enigma; and as though  
 to humour me you came.  
 But there are precipices  
 within you. Mild and dire,  
 now and absent, like us but  
 wholly other— which side  
 of you am I to believe?

In the same way that deific ‘inaudibility’ may be misinterpreted as indifference (‘one thundering/ on the ear’s drum, the other/ one *mistakeable* for silence’, (ibid.), if we allow our religious thinking to be guided by *human* nomenclature (‘domesticating/ an enigma’) then we will inevitably capitulate to either atheism or agnosticism. ‘Idols’, says Marion, ‘play the role of *domesticated* substitutes for the divine’.<sup>100</sup> The pun on ‘side’ in the penultimate line of the poem reinforces the point. Because he refused to ‘see further’ than the ostensibly visible, even Thomas the Apostle surrendered to agnosticism’s superficially attractive temptations. Once more, the ironic, ‘self-reflective’ tenor of the verse is palpable. God, as the thirteenth poem in the sequence contends, has given us ‘a needle in the mind’ with which to find Christ (C, 54), yet all too often our desire to ‘domesticate’ Christ deflects us from our true and twin courses of spiritual and intellectual discovery. This thirteenth poem was published again in *Mass for*

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*The Idol and Distance*, 66. My emphasis. Marion argues that even Nietzsche ‘remains an idolater because he remains a metaphysician: the “death of God” [...] announces the death of the metaphysical God (the “moral God”). But, as the onto-theological structure of metaphysics remains (will to power/ Eternal Return) the divinity, an other divinity, reappears under a form that is still metaphysical’. Ibid., 73-4. Nietzsche, in other words, has simply substituted one metaphysical idol for another—the will to power—so he has not ‘entered’ (ibid. 75) into the ‘distance’ required in order to correctly perceive divinity. If this is correct and if a similar rejection of onto-theology can be ascertained in Thomas, then critics such as John Barnie and Geoffrey Hill, for instance, who both argue that Thomas is essentially a ‘non-theistic’ poet, are perhaps overlooking the very dynamic which propels much of his religious poetry.

*Hard Times* under the title ‘Migrants’ (*MHT*, 80). It is interesting that in the second version of the text Thomas has combined the two tercets of the *Counterpoint* poem into a sestet, thereby making obvious the sonnet form of the poem and the ‘turn of thought’ between octave and sestet. Perhaps Thomas did this in order to emphasize that the second stanza is an explicit rejection of the opening stanza’s declaration that God is ‘that great void/ we must enter’. We can connect the image of the ‘needle in the mind’ with a similar image from the uncollected poem ‘Not So’ (*UP*, 49): ‘My mind’s compass windily veers/ From point to point and is not true’. It is perhaps helpful to gloss both these images with Marion’s discussion of 1 Corinthians 1: 20-21, which ‘counterpoints’ ‘the wisdom of this world’ with ‘the wisdom of God’:

the “wisdom of God” (1: 21), later designated “the wisdom come for us from God” (1: 30), contradicts “the wisdom of the world” and drives it to distraction, “distracts” it (1: 20), as a magnet distracts a compass, in depriving it of all reference to a fixed pole [...] One orients oneself to Being as the needle orients itself to the north, for the Orient itself is found only if it does not lose the north, by relation to which it is defined; thus being spreads or is unfolded only by yielding to the fold of ontological difference that implies Being. To distract being hence would signify nothing less than driving it to distraction by rendering it free from Being, unhinging it from Being, dissociating it from Being.<sup>101</sup>

‘The imperatives of the instincts’ (*C*, 61), like the much earlier poem ‘The Question’ in *The Stones of the Field* (15), clarifies the connections as well as disparities between the emotions (the ‘heart’) and the intellect (the ‘mind’). The poem may therefore be interpreted as

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<sup>101</sup> *God Without Being*, 90-1.

a restatement of Thomas's view that the Resurrection is: 'an eruption of the deity into ordinary life, a *lifting up* of ordinary life into a higher level'.<sup>102</sup> Although, on pain of absurdity, we may never entertain 'complete' knowledge of God's soteriological plan ('the ripening apple never// to fall from the topmost branches/ of truth's tree'), recognising *this* truth provides us with all the 'knowledge' we really require: 'A site for the repair/ of promises that were broken, for picking/ up pieces of the smashed dream'.<sup>103</sup> By understanding that limited knowledge of God *is* knowledge of God, spiritual poverty turns into richness, Christic-deific silence is converted into 'unheard music', 'distance' contracts into proximity, and the *hic et nunc* becomes charged with religious confidence:

Tell the poor of the world

there is nothing to pay, no distance  
to travel; that they are invited  
to the marriage of here and now;  
that the crystal in which they look,

grey with foreboding as the moon  
with earth's shadow, has this  
as its far side, turning necessarily towards  
us with the reversal of our values.

As in the opening poem of the 'AD.' section, it is *our* 'values', our 'lenses' as the earlier text

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<sup>102</sup> 'R. S. Thomas in Conversation with Molly Price-Owen', in *The David Jones Journal*, R. S. Thomas Special Issue (Summer/ Autumn 2001) 98. My emphases.

<sup>103</sup> Continuing the argument that perceptual revitalization is the necessary counterpart to intellectual and spiritual revitalization, we could say that the reference to 'site' comprises a pun.

phrases it, which must be ‘reversed’ if we are to witness the saving grace of the Crucifixion. Athenagoras of Athens wrote contemptuously of those who consider themselves ‘fit to know what concerns God not from God himself, but from himself alone’, and ‘The imperatives of the instincts’ appears to contain a comparable critique of human audacity.<sup>104</sup> We need to rid ourselves of our ‘human’ approach to divinity. God is not some kind of frontier waiting to be crossed—to think thus is to become imprisoned by metaphysical machinery—for what is *actually* required is to experience, rather than scrutinize, the eternal unfolding of Christic revelation.

The penultimate poem in the volume continues the argument: ‘When we are weak, we are/ strong’ (C, 62). To appreciate that our religious knowledge *is* imperfect is evidence of theological maturity and intellectual resilience. Our verbalisations of divinity, our ‘puckering’ locutions to refer again to the opening poem, are both an encumbrance *and* an encouragement. By recognising that our language may misrepresent divinity, we begin to understand those ways in which divinity may be properly expressed. There is the eschatology of the world but there is also an eschatology of the self, and it is this latter which Thomas, throughout the volume, is at pains to accentuate and investigate.<sup>105</sup> By understanding that divinity is non-metaphysical we open the way for Christ, the ‘uninvited guest’ of the poem’s final line, to come to our ‘inadequate’ table—the metaphor of communal eating an obvious reference to the Eucharist—and Eternity itself ‘contracts’, as it were, into ‘the understanding/ that that little is more than enough’ (C, 63).<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> *A Plea Regarding Christians*, VII, P. G. 6, 904b, Cited in *God Without Being*, 223, n. 1.

<sup>105</sup> Thomas’s classifications in *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse* (1963) also involve a recognisably ‘eschatological’ dynamic. We move *from* ‘God’ and ‘Self’ to ‘Nothing’, ‘It’ and ‘All’. The final section of texts represents the various poets’ responses to what Hopkins, in the concluding poem of the volume, famously terms ‘the grandeur of God’.

<sup>106</sup> On the obvious allusion to Eucharist feast in the volume’s penultimate poem, cf. this comment from Walford Gealy’s review of *The Page’s Drift: R. S. Thomas at Eighty*: ‘In R. S. there is very little of Love’s bidding to His feast and nowhere, it appears, does the bard sit down and eat his meat’. *New Welsh Review* (Winter 1991-1992), 27.

### III

*Counterpoint*, then, is Thomas's most prolonged and explicit statement that man's relationship with Christ is dependent on praxis. By possessing the courage to witness Christ as 'icon' we are able to 'see' Christ and 'see more' than Christ. To appropriate the famous image from Acts, realizing and then embracing the 'iconography' of Christ allows the scales to drop from our eyes. In *Mass for Hard Times*, there are many poems which also argue that Christ is best approached in this essentially 'iconographical' manner.<sup>107</sup> The 'Kyrie' section of the title poem, for instance, requests that God pardon man for his intellectual timidity: 'Because we will protect ourselves/ from ourselves to the point/ of destroying ourselves – Lord have mercy' (*MHT*, 11). In addition to this, the opening and closing stanzas of the 'Agnus Dei' poem (*MHT*, 15), recognise that to witness Christ as the Sacrificial Lamb, as perceived by John the Baptist (John 1: 29), requires perceptual and intellectual rejuvenation:

No longer the Lamb  
 but the idea of it.  
 Can an idea bleed?  
 On what altar  
 does one sacrifice an idea? [...]

God is love. Where  
 there is no love, no God?  
 There is only the gap between  
 word and deed we try

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<sup>107</sup> Of course, many of the poems also reengage the related theme of man's distortive anthropomorphic compulsion; for example, 'Credo' (*MHT*, 12); 'Preference' (*MHT*, 32); 'Tell Us' (*MHT*, 46) 'Something More' (*MHT*, 57). Thomas's point seems to be this: by rejecting the onto-theological/ anthropomorphic 'reduction' of God, we *inevitably* initiate a revitalized doctrine of Christ.

narrowing with an idea.

In this poem, it would appear that Thomas actually *welcomes* the ‘gaps’ or, to turn once more to Marion’s exegetical nomenclature, the irreconcilable ‘distances’, between man and the Christ. ‘Narrowing’ is suggestive of contraction or reduction, so, in this sense, the visually-conspicuous noun ‘try’ communicates an important subtext of intellectual futility. We attempt to narrow the ‘distance’ between God and ourselves through onto-theological ‘ideas’, without recognising that these ‘ideas’ themselves are the very foundation of our theological uncertainty. We can elucidate this notion further with reference to William V. Davis’s ‘God of the gaps’ argument:

God’s metaphysically mystical presence is only “visible” as a mental shadow [in ‘Shadows’, (*F*, 25)], and as that, it is only an implied presence. This meeting, mind to mind, across the gaps of thought, creates a shiver of recognition so dark in “splendour” that it can “blind us”.<sup>108</sup>

The problem with this analysis, is that the expression ‘metaphysically mystical’ seems unavoidably self-contradictory. If Thomas’s God is a ‘metaphysical’ presence, then it is difficult to see how the insights of the mystic are required. Conversely, if God can only be approached through some sort of ‘mysticism’, then God *cannot* be a metaphysical presence. Depending on how one wishes to regard them, the repeated references in the ‘Agnus Dei’ poem to ‘ideas’ may possess either Platonic or Kantian implications. For Plato, an idea (*eidei*) was a metaphysical entity which existed independently of consciousness. Therefore, it may be the case that in stressing an ‘idea’ as that which narrows thought, Thomas is arguing that a

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<sup>108</sup> R. S. Thomas: *Poetry and Theology*, 92.



‘metaphysical’ divinity (‘God as Deus Absconditus’) does *not* exist independently of thought but is a purely human construct. Alternatively, Kant held that ‘ideas’ or ‘things in themselves’ could never be known, so in this interpretation Thomas is perhaps underscoring the pointlessness of an ‘ontological’ comprehension of divinity. In both readings, however, the keynote remains unchanged: theological concepts unintentionally misrepresent that which they were envisaged to elucidate.

The arms of the Cross, as the ‘Benedictus’ (*MHT*, 14) poem has it, aim ‘both ways’, to simultaneous belief and unbelief, and it is this *apparent* paradox which sincere religious thought must engage and surmount. We must not succumb to an ‘idolatry’ of the Cross—that is, we must not reduce the Crucifixion to a merely human concept—but learn to ‘see through’ the Cross to the everlasting realities behind it: ‘Blessed be the far side of the Cross and the back/ of the mirror, that they *are* concealed from us’ (*ibid.*, my emphasis). Once more, the poet’s appeal is to an ‘iconography’ *and* a praxis: ‘Because you are not there/ When I turn, but are *in* the turning,/ Gloria’ (‘Mass for Hard Times’, *MHT*, 12, my emphasis). To truthfully envision Christ as ‘icon of the invisible Father’, is accordingly similar to the earlier poems’ arguments that God must not be ‘named’ and that deific ‘silence’, if *accurately* regarded, is vigorously effusive and loquacious:

Almighty

pseudonym, grant me at last,

as the token of my belief,

such ability to remain

silent, as is the nearest to a reflection

of your silence. (‘Mass for Hard Times’, *MHT*, 13)

God *is* silence and ‘pseudonymity’; hence, divine truths are ‘best’ found within metaphor or ‘iconicity’. Authentic theological arguments must commence with the *presupposition* that man’s ‘separation’ from God provides unassailable evidence of deific immanence. God’s ‘detachment’ does not have to be ‘duelled with’, as William V. Davis asserts by way of a gloss from Roethke, but inhabited, experienced, and welcomed.<sup>109</sup> Genuine incarnational theology therefore repudiates the ‘ontological’ interpretation of divinity and acknowledges that ‘to make sense of Christianity’, as Thomas said in an interview to Byron Rogers—reiterating of course what he had previously said to Ormond—the Resurrection must be approached ‘from the point of view of metaphor’.<sup>110</sup>

This ‘metaphorical’ or ‘iconographical’ interpretation of the Christic mystery is explored throughout *Mass for Hard Times*. The second poem in the collection, ‘Stations’ (*MHT*, 16), combines the Sisyphean myth with an extended imagery of Golgotha’s triumph:

#### Why

can we not be taught  
 there is no hill beyond this one  
 we roll our minds to the top  
 of, not to take off into  
 empty space, nor to be cast back down  
 where we began, but to hold the position  
 assigned to us, long as time

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<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 60. The sentence quoted by Davis is, ‘God for me still remains someone to be confronted, to be duelled with’. Theodore Roethke, ‘On Identity’, in *On the Poet and His Craft*, ed. Ralph J. Mills Jr. (Seattle: U. Washington P., 1965), 26. Davis believes that Thomas’s religious verse is sturdily metaphysical: ‘Such a confrontation [between man and the divine] requires the poet to deal with the presence of the absence of self in the context of an ontological and epistemological crisis which only the poetry of apocalypse can confront’. *Ibid.*, 60-1.

<sup>110</sup> ‘The Enigma of Aberdaron’, in *London Sunday Telegraph Magazine*, November 1975, 27-9.

lasts, somewhere half-way  
up between earth and heaven.

In the same way that the Cross is *axis mundi*—‘That in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth’ (Ephesians 1: 10)—we must learn that *our* role, our ‘station’ in life, is to exist *between* the temporal and the eternal.<sup>111</sup> ‘Between faith and doubt’, as ‘Waiting’ (*F*, 32) phrases it, is the very interior of religious consciousness, yet to recognise that religious consciousness will always be ‘fractured’ in this manner requires the imaginative capacity to perceive more than the immediately apparent. Analogous to Camus’s famous view that we ‘must imagine Sisyphus happy’,<sup>112</sup> ‘Stations’ seems to posit that we should stop searching for ‘more’ than the *hic et nunc* and accept that theological confidence is *defined* by ‘indecision’. As Browning writes in ‘Bishop Blougram’s Apology’, extracts from which Thomas included in *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, ‘let doubt occasion still more faith’.<sup>113</sup> To expand the point by way of two Scriptural glosses, when Isaiah maintains that God cannot be ‘likened’ to anything (40: 18), he obviously does not mean that God cannot be ‘verbalised’. More exactly, his point is that by recognising that God is *beyond* human description provides us with the only description of God

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<sup>111</sup> It is worth quoting Frye again on Genesis 28: ‘In the days of the geocentric universe, there was some scientific status for an *axis mundi*, but there is none now, or certainly not in any area that I am competent to discuss [...] To the imagination, the universe has always presented the appearance of a middle world, with a second world above it and a third one below it. We may say [...] that images of ascent are connected with the *intensifying of consciousness*, and images of descent with the reinforcing of it by other forms of awareness, such as fantasy or dream’. *Words with Power*, 151. My emphasis. Once more, then, the central idea is that in order correctly to ‘engage’ divinity we must recalibrate or renew our understanding *of* divinity.

<sup>112</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1975), 111.

<sup>113</sup> Thomas also included the following from the same poem:

No, when the fight begins within himself,  
A man’s worth something. God stoops o’er his head,  
Satan looks up between his feet—both tug—  
He’s left, himself, in the middle: the soul wakes  
And grows. Prolong that battle through his life!

Browning’s themes of man being ‘left’ between faith and doubt and the importance of ‘fighting’ both, are obviously extremely similar to Thomas’s theme in ‘Stations’.

we really require; if properly understood, the non-verbalisation of divinity, we must remember, remains a powerful allocution. Similarly, Paul's discourse on the Areopagus in Acts 17: 16-34, in which he castigates the Athenians for worshipping an 'unknown God', does not mean that God can be 'perfectly' known. Paul is arguing that we must know God *as* unknown, which, as the discourse makes clear, is nevertheless an important form of knowledge:

Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious. For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you. (Acts 17: 22-3)

'To hold the position/ assigned to us' means precisely to undertake such declarative praxis: 'The ultimate reality is what we call God, and this reality is the *use* of human language in its search for contact with that reality'.<sup>114</sup> God is 'other' ('First Person', *MHT*, 18, l. 18), but He is also the 'one word' (*ibid.*, l. 24) of the Incarnation. God is silence *and* colloquy, and true faith must learn, to quote the 'Unity' lecture again, that something 'can be A and not-A at the same time'.<sup>115</sup> We must not 'surrender to the belief/ that we are not whole' ('First Person', *MHT*, 18) but compel ourselves towards a kind of conceptual 'baptism': silence *is* 'dialogue'; distance *is* 'proximity'; doubt *is* 'faith'. Christ, 'God's metaphor' as Thomas defines Him, is also 'ultimate reality',<sup>116</sup> and to express the ultimate through metaphor means to 'transfer'

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<sup>114</sup> 'R. S. Thomas: Priest and Poet', 54. My emphasis. This obviously connects with Abercuawg as representing a *type* of theological reasoning; we will *never* 'achieve' Abercuawg, but our continual attempts to do so *renew* our spiritual state.

<sup>115</sup> The theme of the ostensibly 'singular' being multifaceted is explored in several poems within the collection. 'One Day' (*MHT*, 19), for example, the poem immediately following 'First Person', is constructed around the 'silence as colloquy' trope, while 'The Refusal' (*MHT*, 40) and 'Markers' (*MHT*, 47) argue that true knowledge is the 'absence' of knowledge.

<sup>116</sup> 'A Frame for Poetry', 90.

(*metaphorá*) from the literal to the figurative. In other words, we move *from* ‘idolatry’ *to* the ‘A and not-A’ dialectics of the icon. The *mystic* may not require ‘transference’ from literality to symbolism in order to realize Christic truth—‘Some of the chief mystics and saints have advanced far along the way to the Beatific Vision, where *all sense imagery is transcended*’<sup>117</sup>—but Thomas is no mystic, and, moreover, neither is the preponderance of men. What *is* required is a type of imaginative farsightedness and the poet, almost by definition, is the one most skilled to ‘give birth/ to the larger vision’ (‘The Prisoner’, *LS*, 52):

Sin happens, pain happens, when we forget  
 who we are, descending deep  
 into the flesh without the Golden Bough  
 as our guide [...]  
 leaving it  
 to the poet, playing upon his timeless  
 instrument, to call all things back  
 into irradiated orbit about the one word. (‘First Person’)<sup>118</sup>

In this poem, Thomas appears to contend that ‘division’ (ibid., l. 17) *is* our humanity. The reference to Frazer perhaps means that in order to properly comprehend the religious, we must engage in a kind of theological ‘anthropology’. We must analyse the cultural/ intellectual foundations of religion and therefore the reasons *why* we remain so determined to dismiss ‘bifurcation’ (‘A and not-A’) as the bedrock *of* theology. The ‘one word’—Christ as Logos—

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid. My emphasis.

<sup>118</sup> There is an obvious pun within the poem’s title. God is the ‘first person’ in the Trinity, but, to fully realize God’s relationship to Christ and the Holy Spirit, we must concentrate on how *our* conceptual nomenclature often deflects us from religious understanding. As the important enjambement from stanzas two to three makes clear: ‘It is the nominative// that is important’.

tells us all that we require, yet only the poet possesses the necessary imagination to reconcile silence with loquacity and indecision with conviction. To quote some further lines by Browning, lines which were quoted approvingly by Thomas towards the end of ‘A Frame for Poetry’:

I say the acknowledgement of God in Christ  
 Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee  
 All questions in the earth and out of it.<sup>119</sup>

If Christ is a ‘poet’ Himself, ‘giving birth/ to the larger vision’, then it follows that He must be ‘interpreted’ and ‘Nativity’ (*MHT*, 21), a poem worth quoting in full, seems to pivot on the importance of ‘exegeses’ in theological discernment:

Christmas Eve! Five  
 hundred poets waited, pen  
 poised above paper,  
 for the poem to arrive,  
 bells ringing. It was because  
 the chimney was too small,  
 because they had ceased  
 to believe, the poem passed them  
 by on its way  
 out into oblivion, leaving  
 the doorstep bare

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<sup>119</sup> *Selected Prose*, 94. The lines are taken from ‘The Death in the Desert’.

of all but the sky-rhyming  
 child to whom later  
 on they would teach prose.

This text, similar in argumentative tendency to the title poem of *Poetry for Supper*, contrasts the silence of the Christ-Child—and by implication the later ‘silences’ of Christ—with the noisy thoughtlessness of men. Here, even the poets have succumbed to distortive literalism: Christ may decide not speak but His ‘interpreters’ are nonetheless determined to coerce Him into oration. The superficiality of the exegetes’ ‘prose’—‘prose’ in this poem and in ‘Poetry for Supper’ functioning as a metonymy for ‘banality’—and their arrogant desire to ‘teach’ Christ that which is true, shows man’s intellectual failure and his creative short-sightedness. The poet, supposedly the ‘supreme manipulator of metaphor,’<sup>120</sup> has mislaid the visualizing capacity which is the cornerstone of his craft; as William J. McGill correctly says, ‘[the poets] await the poem, the word, but envision it as Santa Claus, not as the Incarnate Word. Their metaphor is too small’.<sup>121</sup>

Paucity of imagination is also the theme of ‘Questions to the Prophet’ (*MHT*, 22): ‘Did Christ crying: “neither do I condemn thee”,/ condemn the prostitute to be good for nothing?// If he who increases riches increases sorrow/ why are his tears more like pearls than the swine’s tusks?’ The text’s sequence of compressed paradoxes and pedantically literal questions stresses that imaginative awakening underpins genuine theological enquiry. The exigencies of

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<sup>120</sup> ‘Introduction’ to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, 8.

<sup>121</sup> *Poets’ Meeting: George Herbert, R. S. Thomas, and the Argument with God*, 176. McGill, however, appears to contradict himself slightly. Earlier in his book he compares Herbert and Thomas thus: ‘Herbert, writing within the ethos of seventeenth-century England when the King James Version of the Bible was fresh, could easily move from “this book of starres” to the Living Word. For Thomas, the distinction between the Book, this document of human language, and the Word, the divine truth that we struggle to articulate, made such movement difficult, if not impossible. In a much earlier poem, “A Welsh Testament” from *Tares* (39-40), he spoke of trying to cram God “Between the boards of a black book.”’ (57) To counter McGill’s assertion, it seems clear that the second stanza of ‘A Welsh Testament’, from which the quotation is lifted, entails an argument against Biblical *literalism* rather than one against the possibility of ‘articulating’ God.

conceptual progression, or, to continue this chapter's central contention, the necessity of moving *from* 'idolatry' to 'iconicity', is also examined in 'The God' (*MHT*, 25-6). In this poem, Thomas once again censures man's idolatrous proclivity to fashion God in *his* image and likeness. The third stanza, for example, juxtaposes deific reality against human presumption:

*Of Artists*

Who disguises  
 himself in wood and stone;  
 who has to be unmasked  
 with much patience; who escapes  
 in the end, leaving them standing,  
 tool in hand, in front of a supposition.

The controlling metaphor's vehicle of 'unmasking', a metaphor which, it could be argued, is redolent of the earlier volumes' foregrounding of *prosopopoeia* as the trope most capable of 'articulating' divinity, is overturned by the ironic negation of the tenor. To expand this point, it is worth mentioning again that the *prosopon*, in Greek aesthetics, was that which expressed inner characteristics not visible to the human eye. As Richard Kearney remarks, 'In theatre it referred more specifically to the "face-mask" which *expresses* secret and inexpressible things, marking off each one as a distinct person (I/ you/ he/ she) and making manifest in figural or imagistic-mimetic terms some inner meaning or script'.<sup>122</sup> The 'mask', in other words, *is* the

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<sup>122</sup> *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*, 116, n. 23. My emphasis. Cf. John Manoussakis, 'I-M-Possible: Contrapuntus et Augmentationem', in *Traversing the Imaginary: Richard Kearney and the Postmodern Challenge*, ed. John Manoussakis and Peter Gratton (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern U. P., 2007): 'To be a *pros-opon* means to be on your way towards the other being. This also situates the being into a perpetual ek-sistence, a stepping-out-of-yourself and a being-towards-the-other. Being-towards-the-other means also to present yourself, to make yourself in the other's presence (*-opos*). *Prosopon* strongly implies reciprocity of gaze through which the



reality, and so by attempting to ‘get behind’ it, one inevitably leads oneself into confusion and bewilderment. The artists have failed to reveal anything, for their entire project was obstructed from the beginning by a misrepresentative supposition. The very hypothesis that divinity requires ‘unveiling’ or ‘disclosure’ is exactly that which confounds the intelligence. Like the ‘theologians’ in the fifth stanza of the poem, the artists have supplanted ‘The word’ with ‘an idea’ and have thus permitted their gaze to be deluded by idolatrous misrepresentations of what is actually there. The artists and theologians attempt to ‘capture’ the ‘being’ of God in wood and ideas, but, since Christ is already before us, there is nothing of any substance to apprehend.

We can refer to Thomas’s ‘Introduction’ to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse* to broaden the argument that divinity is already present. Here, Thomas writes that since the days of Tertullian there appears to have existed a ‘distrust of the aesthetic’. Thomas means that since theology and poetry are habitually thought of as dissimilar activities—Thomas’s ‘ill-assorted pair of horses bridled together’—to attempt the ‘elucidation’ of divinity by means of the creative arts is a largely pointless enterprise.<sup>123</sup> However, as the ‘Introduction’ makes evident by means of the oft-quoted Coleridgean reference, both poetry and religion are illustrative of ‘the unifying power of the imagination’.<sup>124</sup> In ‘The God’ Thomas is obviously not criticising the ‘aesthetic’ representation of Christ per se, but more the attempt to portray Christ through a *specific* representative paradigm.<sup>125</sup> Imagistic or representational specificity would, by definition, collapse into mere idolatry. The ‘mimetic’ depiction of Christ is a straightforward

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self is interpellated by the other, and ultimately, ‘othered’. The antonym of a prosopon is again described by the Greek language by the term *atomon*. Prosopon and atomon are the only two existential possibilities open to a human being. However, to be an atomon means to be in fragmentation (*a-* and *temno*, to cut; therefore, the atomic is that which cannot be cut any further). As in the English language, the in-dividual is he who has been ‘divided’ so many times that he has reached the point where no further split is possible. The individual stands in sharp contrast to the prosopon. Where the latter gathers and unites, there the former cuts off, separates, alienates’. Cited in Kearney, 117, n. 24. If it is correct to maintain that in many of his religious poems Thomas ‘presents’ God through the trope of *prosopopeia*, then, assuming that Manoussakis’s analysis is correct, it follows that in these verses Thomas’s God is not ‘separated’ from humanity at all.

<sup>123</sup> ‘Introduction’ to *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, 8.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>125</sup> Of course, Christ’s statement of self-identity in John 13; 19 and 18: 5-6, 8, ‘I am he’, is an echo, as it were, of the purposeful *ambiguity* of the Tetragrammaton.

attempt to understand Christ via purely human nomenclature. When Christ informs the woman of Samaria that ‘God is a Spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in spirit’ (John 4: 24), He is obviously pointing out that ‘God’ is not a proper name; nevertheless, the similetic ‘God as Spirit’ formulation carries authoritative referential significance.<sup>126</sup> As is the case with ‘Nativity’, ‘The God’ informs us that we must tutor ourselves to understand that the crucified Christ, who, we must remember, *is* God, cannot be ‘compressed’ into syntax, stone, or stale and unadventurous philosophies.

‘The Reason’ (*MHT*, 27), the next poem in the book, allows a comparable interpretation:

I gird myself for the agon.  
 And there at the beginning  
 is the word. What does it mean  
 and who initiated it?  
 Behind the word is the name  
 not to be known for fear  
 we should gain power over it [...]  
  
 Nearer the cipher the Christ  
 wrote on the ground, with no one  
 without sin to peer at it  
 over his shoulder.

Thomas steels himself to announce the ‘agon’, the contest or battle, within which he will

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<sup>126</sup> Cf. Ezekiel 1: 26-28 and Revelation 1: 14-16, where both Ezekiel and John attempt to ‘portray’ God via a flurry of powerful similes.

encounter Christ, the ‘protagonist’ (a noun derived from ‘agon’) of the soteriological narrative.<sup>127</sup> The inherent difficulty of *properly* recognizing and ‘expressing’ Christ generates the poem’s diction of semantic uncertainty. For example, ll. 5-7 of the opening stanza, quoted above, are an explicit reference to the Tetragrammaton—and thus the Scriptural prohibition against ‘speaking’ the Name—while the opening sentence of the second stanza, ‘Perhaps our letters for it/ are too many’, emphasizes that ‘the word’, or Christ, repudiates ‘denotative’ certitude. The reference to John 8: 6-8 in ll. 19-22, however, provides us with an exegetical tactic with which to understand deific-Christic ‘taciturnity’: ‘Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not [...] and again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground’. Instead of condemning the adulterous woman, Christ famously challenges the scribes and the Pharisees to investigate their own moral deficiencies, and He does so, according to most Biblical scholars anyway, by means of a silently written reference to Jeremiah 17: 13:

O Lord, the hope of Israel, all that forsake thee shall be ashamed, and they that depart from me shall be written in the earth, because they have forsaken the Lord, the fountain of living waters.<sup>128</sup>

The ‘cipher’ drawn by Christ in the poem is not a cryptogram—God, as has been argued, is not some sort of Enigma machine awaiting the inspired insights of the cryptographer—but an allusion to an earlier text which pivots on the twin ideas that faith and morality give us all we

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<sup>127</sup> Cf. Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (Michigan/ Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2006), 411: ‘With Timothy’s stability of faith in mind, it is preferable to translate the genitive qualifying phrase “of [the] faith” as a reference to the essential quality of the Christian life as contest (= persistent believing; i.e., “keep competing in the good contest [“agon”] of faith [...] Paul’s concern here is that Timothy not grow weary or complacent in believing, as the false teachers so clearly had done’.

<sup>128</sup> The Jeremiah text could also be the source for Thomas’s description of God’s mind as ‘its own fountain’ in ‘The God’.

require regarding our relationship with the divine.<sup>129</sup> A praxis of faith and a praxis of ethics are the interwoven leitmotifs of religious consciousness. Thus, it is by *living* our religion rather than ‘verbalising’ or ‘analysing’ it, that we come to a fuller understanding of what our religion is actually *about*: ‘to pray true is to say nothing’ (‘The Letter’, *MHT*, 77). In the Johannine text, Christ, God’s ‘icon’, makes us ‘see through’ the woman’s iniquities to the iniquities latent within ourselves, and He does this by *not* articulating her iniquities: ‘as though he heard them not’. The ‘icon’ of God is loquaciously silent, and His unspoken yet voluble directives pull us towards the truth:

we are here  
 not necessarily to read on,  
 but to explore with blind  
 fingers the word in the cold,  
 until the snow turn to feathers  
 and somewhere far down we come  
 upon warmth and a heart beating.

If it is correct to say that ‘The Reason’ is predominantly concerned with self-investigation, then the title of the poem suggests two interlocked themes. The ‘reason’ we continue to search for divinity is because we feel irresistibly compelled to do so. However, the text is also an expression of the ways in which ‘reason’, that is, our capacity to rationalise and therefore our language itself, may *deflect* us from our true objective. As ‘Preference’ (*MHT*, 32) makes clear, Thomas does not believe that it is possible to entertain a concept without also

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<sup>129</sup> The two ‘greatest’ commandments, of course, are fideistic and ethical declarations: ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all they heart, and with all the soul, and with all thy mind’; ‘Thou shalt love they neighbour as thyself’. Matthew 22: 37-9.

having access to the ‘accompanying’ word: ‘The scientists teach/ the possibility of thinking// without words. Their god/ is the old nameless god/ of calculus and inertia’. We believe God is hidden because He defies expression—‘the name/ not to be known’—but that is only because we supplant the silent Word with specious verbosity: ‘Our sentences/ are but as footprints arrested/ indefinitely on its threshold’. We have not instructed the intelligence in the correct ‘investigative methods’. With perseverance, ‘the mind’s tooling’, as Thomas writes in ‘Emerging’ (*F*, 41), will eventually disclose that which was hitherto concealed, but thought *itself* must be ‘retooled’, redrawn or reengineered, for such disclosures to occur.

In the context of redesigning or even ‘uprooting’ thought so that thought may mature and grow, a gloss by means of the later Wittgenstein is once again helpful:

Getting hold of the difficulty *deep down* is what is hard. Because if it is grasped near the surface it simply remains the difficulty it was. It has to be pulled out by the roots; and that involves our beginning to think about these [things] in a new way. The change is as decisive as, for example, that from the alchemical to the chemical way of thinking. The new way of thinking is what is so hard to establish.

Once the new way of thinking has been established, the old problems vanish; indeed they become hard to recapture. For they go with our way of expressing ourselves and, if we clothe ourselves in a new form of expression, the old problems are discarded along with the old garment.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G. H. von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 48. Emphasis in original. Wittgenstein appears in ‘Markers’ (*MHT*, 47), Thomas writing somewhat cryptically of the Austrian’s ‘signposts pointing/ at the boundaries of language/ into the obligatory void’. As the tone of the poem is obviously humorous, it could be argued that the description of language as an ‘obligatory void’ should be taken sardonically. The focus of the poem is not so much that language

By recognising that Christ, the Word, is the iconographical ‘representation’ of the Father, we lacerate the superfluous from our thinking and therefore begin to ‘think’ the Father and *His* ‘words’ in a fresh and reenergised fashion. It is this movement towards ‘a new/ colouring for thought’s apple’ (‘Plas-yn-Rhiw’, *MHT*, 31) which provides the thematic foundation to many of the religious poems within the collection. ‘R. I. P./ 1588-1988’ (*MHT*, 35-7), asserts that religious language must be revolutionised if religious sentience is to develop: ‘Is an obsession with language/ an acknowledgement we are too late/ to save it?’ The poem’s final stanza re-accentuates the theme that perceptual and intellectual revitalization are the preliminary steps towards theological maturity:

In the beginning  
 was the word. What  
 word? At the end  
 is the dust. We know  
 what dust; the dust  
 that the bone comes to,  
 that is the fall-out  
 from our hubris, the  
 dust on the Book  
 that, out of breath  
 with our hurry  
 we dare not blow off  
 in a cloud, lest out

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has ceased to ‘signify’, but the recognition that words do not have ‘guaranteed’ referents. This understanding stimulates a revitalized *awareness* of language, which was, indeed, the later Wittgenstein’s very point.

of that cloud should  
 be resurrected the one  
 spoken figure we have grown  
 too clever to believe in.

The clipped syntax enacts the ‘hurry’ and also constructs a tone both admonitory and didactic in its rhetorical impetus. Man has inherited Adam’s hubristic belief that he alone is the measure of everything, but Thomas is also expressing the Pauline edict that fallen humanity has been rescued by Golgotha’s victory:

And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit [...] The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from heaven. As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy; and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly. (1 Corinthians 15: 45-9)

‘For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return’ (Genesis 3: 19). The ostensible bleakness of the initial text, however, is powerfully counterbalanced, first of all by the consoling words of the Psalmist, and then by the philosopher of Ecclesiastes

Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him. For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust. As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. (Psalm 103 13-15)

Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto  
God who gave it. (Ecclesiastes 12:7)

Christ is *all* we require in order to ‘listen’ to God; as Thomas informs us in ‘R. I. P./ 1588-1988’, the ‘second Adam’ is God’s ‘*spoken* figure’. By drowning out Christ with the clatter of concepts, however, we deafen ourselves to His soteriological mission: ‘we have grown/ too clever to believe’. Hubristic self-sufficiency must be discarded and, to appropriate Wittgenstein’s metaphor, that is only possible if we firstly ‘retailor’ or, as Thomas writes in ‘The Refusal’ (*MHT*, 40), attentively ‘cultivate’ our theological language:

#### Wringing

our hands, we wring our belief  
dry, refusing from pride  
or shame after the failure  
of our species the one cultivable  
remedy the intellect disdains.

To revitalise our religious language is far from straightforward: ‘We have been victims/ of vocabulary for too long [...] It is the dictionary/ deceives us’. (‘The Question’, *MHT*, 42). Nevertheless, the mind *can* be ‘cultivated’, prompted or encouraged, into undertaking paradigmatic modification. Through proper ‘training’ the mind can indeed complete the demanding movement from an ‘idolatrous’ to an ‘iconic’ comprehension of Christ.<sup>131</sup> ‘Tell Us’

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<sup>131</sup> Of course, as Thomas is not a ‘mystic’, the process of ‘rethinking’ God must, of necessity, be protracted. Cf. the extended metaphor of the waves in ‘Tidal’ (*MHT*, 43), through which the poet recognises that this recalibration of religious thought requires perseverance, practice, and tenacity. In earlier volumes there are many poems in which the gradual *evolution* of religious thought is suggested as either a primary or a secondary theme; for example, ‘Alpine’ (*T*, 44); ‘This One’ (*H*, 3); ‘No Answer’ (*H*, 7); ‘The River’ (*H*, 23); ‘The Kingdom’ (*H*, 34); ‘Emerging’ (*LS*, 1); ‘Relay’ (*LS*, 9); ‘The Prayer’ (*LS*, 10); ‘Probing’ (*LS*, 23); ‘The Moon in Lleyn’ (*LS*, 30-1);



(*MHT*, 46), a poem which makes us recollect the ‘naming’ leitmotifs of ‘The Reason’ and especially ‘Andante’ (*EA*, 61), elucidates again the significance of conceptual reorientation in theological enquiry:

We have had names for you:  
 The Thunderer, the Almighty  
 Hunter, Lord of the snowflake  
 and the sabre-toothed tiger [...]

You have answered  
 us with the image of yourself  
 on a hewn tree, suffering  
 injustice, pardoning it;  
 pointing as though in either  
 direction; horrifying us  
 with the possibility of dislocation.

The keynote of the later religious poetry reverberates once more. To ‘name’ God is as profane as it is pointless, for God *elects* to manifest Himself through the person of Christ, and, as Christ is ‘consubstantial’ with God, by worshipping Christ we necessarily worship the Father:

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‘Suddenly’ (*LS*, 32); ‘The Bright Field’ (*LS*, 60); ‘Sea-Watching’ (*LS*, 64); ‘Night Sky’ (*F*, 18); ‘Adjustments’ (*F*, 29); ‘Travels’ (*F*, 38); ‘Emerging’ (*F*, 41); ‘The Film of God’ (*F*, 47); ‘Balance’ (*F*, 49); ‘Covenant’ (*BNH*, 82); ‘Waiting’ (*BHN*, 83); ‘Pluperfect’ (*BNH*, 89); ‘One Way’ (*BHN*, 95); ‘The New Mariner’ (*BHN*, 99); ‘The Presence’ (*BHN*, 107); ‘Gradual’ (*LP*, 178); ‘Inside’ (*LP*, 199); ‘Destinations’ (*D*, 17); ‘Cones’ (*EA*, 3); ‘Hebrews 12: 29’ (*EA*, 11); ‘The Wood’ (*EA*, 16); ‘Calling’ (*EA*, 31); ‘Strands’ (*EA*, 32); ‘Retirement’ (*EA*, 38); ‘Approaches’ (*EA*, 55); ‘This One’ (*EA*, 58); ‘Cures’ (*EA*, 66); ‘Look Out’ (*EA*, 68); ‘Revision’ (*EA*, 69).

And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2: 8-11)

Both the poem and the Pauline epistle substitute the aloofness of the ‘Deus Absconditus’ with the tenderness of the Suffering Servant. Moreover, as St. Paul makes clear, the acknowledgement of Christ’s divinity prompts man into forceful ‘declaration’ of the Father. In the same way that Christ’s ‘iconography’ demolishes the ontological paradigm, the recognition that Christ is the ‘spoken’ of God liberates the hitherto inarticulate tongue: if we ‘speak’ Christ we simultaneously ‘speak’ the one who sent Him (John 17: 8). We must attempt the ‘dislocation’ of thought’s calcified certainties if religious consciousness is to achieve freedom and maturation. Although it is true that Calvary provides consolation and reassurance, the ‘replacement’ of the Abrahamic God with the Suffering Servant also alarms and surprises—‘The Cross’, we remember from an earlier text, ‘always is avant-garde’ (*ERS*, 82). Comparable in a sense to the visual dynamics of a Surrealist painting, Golgotha challenges consciousness to see deeper than the externally detectable:

between God and man, incommensurability alone makes intimacy possible, because withdrawal alone defines the Father, just as the paternal withdrawal alone saves for man the sumptuous liberty of a Son [...] that which makes “God” available either to qualify or disqualify him offers only an idol of the spectator and is confused with the spectator in a fantasmatic identity. Distance

as di-stance therefore means: *duality* alone allows recognition, communion progresses with the *separation* wherein gazes are exchanged.<sup>132</sup>

Faith must confront, rather than allow, the solipsistic tendency. God must be thought of *as* God and not as some sort of ‘perfected’ reflection of human personality: ‘You were wrong, Narcissus./ The replica of the self/ is to be avoided’ (‘Hark’, *MHT*, 38). As is the case with the ekphrastic poem, ‘Cézanne: The Bridge at Maincy’ (*BHN*, 49), where Thomas’s allusion to the Narcissus myth foregrounds the need to separate ‘looking’ from observation, in ‘Hark’ the underlying idea is that perception requires tutoring if it is to function at all. This theme is also detectable in the final stanza of ‘Something More’ (*MHT*, 57):

They say there is a pool  
                   at the bottom of which  
 you lie, and that we ourselves  
                   are the troublers  
 of its surface. But why,  
                   when we look down,  
                   is it as though  
 we looked up at our own faces  
 at home there among the cloud branches?

This poem, like the earlier one in *Between Here and Now*, expresses the crucial idea that as soon as we begin to ‘search’ for God we incarcerate ourselves within a self-constructed hall of mirrors. To bolster the point with reference to another earlier text:

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<sup>132</sup> *The Idol and Distance*, 198. My emphases.

Both window and mirror. Was he unique in using it as a window of an asylum, as glass to look through into a watery jungle, where life preyed on itself, ferocious yet hushed as the face of the believer, ambushed in a mirror. So much easier for the retired mind to lull itself to sleep among the reflections. (*ERS*, 72)

In the same way that God *can* be ‘seen’ if one is willing to recalibrate one’s understanding of perception, God *can* be ‘spoken’ if one is willing to recalibrate one’s understanding of deific ‘silence’. In particular, God is ‘spoken’ by confessing the ‘otherness’ of Christ’s divinity: ‘O righteous Father, the world hath not known thee: but I have known thee, and these have known that thou hast sent me. And I have declared unto them thy name, and will declare it: that the love wherewith thou hast loved me be in them, and I in them’ (John 18: 25-6). Otherness, iconicity, defamiliarisation, do not sequester but radically *combine*. Plato, believing truth to lie outwith the metaphorical, wished to banish the poets from his perfected state—‘jilting/ the one truth at his side for the shadowless/ idea of it ogling him from Parnassus’ (Markers, *MHT*, 47)—yet, in the post-Golgotha universe, it is only ‘the gospels with their accumulation of metaphor [which] express ultimate reality’.<sup>133</sup> As the ‘Jacob-like’ metaphor of ‘bifurcation’ in ‘Circles’ (*MHT*, 49) suggests, one must understand that non-‘literal’ language provides access to truth in a way that straightforwardly ‘denotative’ language does not:

men crowded a glass

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<sup>133</sup> ‘A Frame for Poetry’, 90.

waiting for it to break  
 out into a new orbit,  
 ignoring the poet

who, from the rope-trick  
 of the language, called down  
 like an angel stranded  
 somewhere between earth and heaven.

The essential propaedeutic of religious thought is re-engagement, re-examination, and eventual *revision* of theological nomenclature. ‘Could Be’ (*MHT*, 54), a poem largely ignored by commentators, seems to merge the themes of Christic ‘iconicity’, man’s solipsistic inclinations, and deific ‘silence’, into a powerful and authoritative statement of theological optimism:

The voice that was  
 as the remains of a smile  
 on the sky’s face said:  
 ‘Listen.’ And I replied:  
 ‘I know. You are the ventriloquist  
 who once sat Christ  
 on your knee and made us imagine  
 you were where you were not.

Will you continue to torment us?

If you are ubiquitous, why  
 not be here, when we say: Now?  
 The electron's confinement gives  
 birth to excess of speed.  
 You, who are without limits,  
 are exempt from time and could move,  
 if you wish, so gradually  
 about your being as to appear  
 to us, when we are furthest off, always  
 to be in the same place.'

John Powell Ward asserts that the poem 'address[es] the present-absent God as edgily and uncertainly as ever'.<sup>134</sup> This reading, however, ignores the obvious allusion to the Exodic 'Name' in the title<sup>135</sup> (in fact, Ward makes no mention of it) and so Ward's interpretation fails to take into account the text's heavily ironic momentum. In 'Could Be', as is often the case with the later Thomas, irony fulfils the role of a wide-ranging argumentative standpoint; as the poet said to Lethbridge, 'I think there's certain amount of misunderstanding of my work [...] a lot of my work is ironic'.<sup>136</sup> At first glance, it may indeed appear that the God presented in the poem is persistently 'beyond' human understanding. Many of the poem's metaphors, however, imply a subtext of ironic reversal of their governing vehicles and, if that is the case, then 'Could Be' conveys a tone, not of religious hopelessness, but of acerbity towards human presumption. God, as the first stanza maintains, requests our *receptivity* to His silence, and so it follows that He is also requesting that we listen to Christic speech. Nevertheless, despite

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<sup>134</sup> *The Poetry of R. S. Thomas*, 183.

<sup>135</sup> 'Yahweh' can also be interpreted as 'the God who may/ could be', which, as we have seen, is the formulation preferred by Richard Kearney.

<sup>136</sup> 'R. S. Thomas talks to J. B. Lethbridge', in *Anglo-Welsh Review* (1983), vol. 74, 40.

God's tender solicitation ('the remains of a smile [...] 'Listen.')

we remain determined to visualise the Son as some sort of vacant-eyed doll: our presumption diminishes God Himself to the level of a mere puppeteer. The metaphor of Christ as a ventriloquist's dummy could also be interpreted as a parodic inversion of the Creed; that is, the proclamation of faith that Christ is 'seated at the right hand of the Father'. The imagery is scathingly and sardonically barbed. The speaker directly addresses God through reference to Christ, yet, because his conception of the deific-Christic relationship is malformed, the speaker fails to appreciate that Christ is *all* the proof we require of the Father's existence. If Christ exists then so does God, but the speaker's dearth of imagination anesthetizes his sensitivity towards what is true. To transpose Thomas's image, it is as if *we* are the visionless marionettes, unthinkingly entangling ourselves within strings our presumption has manufactured. The second stanza censures further man's theological astigmatism. The speaker continues his discourse *to* God, but he cannot appreciate that 'silence' is God's selected *method* of communication. The leaden literalism of the speaker's mind compels him to blasphemous impertinences: 'If you are ubiquitous, why/ not be here, when we say: Now?' The lines recall Moses's rebuke to the Israelites, 'Wherefore do ye tempt the Lord?' (Exodus 17: 2) and Christ's reiteration of the phrase in Matthew 4: 7 and Luke 4: 12. In addition, despite his earlier reference to the Incarnation, the speaker insists that God is 'transcendent' rather than 'immanent'—'You, who are without limits,/ are exempt from time', a position which moves from Christianity to deism—and therefore the speaker's utterances actually foreground the *denial* of the Crucifixion, an historical event, and the substitution of faith with pseudo-scientific certainty: 'The electron's confinement gives/ birth to excess of speed'.<sup>137</sup> The poem's tone of mordant condemnation is also apparent with the echoes of the infinitive 'to be' in l. 11 and l. 17, semantic reverberations which obviously connect both to

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<sup>137</sup> As we have seen, facing poems within collections often turn on similar themes. 'Time' (*MHT*, 55), the poem immediately following 'Could Be', engages the theme of man's confused perceptions of time—'The pessimist says: Time/ goes; the optimist: It is coming'—thereby accentuating the idea in 'Could Be' that to think of God as 'pure transcendence' is mistaken.

the poem's title and to the Exodic allusion in the final line.<sup>138</sup> God 'could be' if only, as it were, we would *let* Him be, for it is our imputation of 'being' which constructs the nucleus of our religious perplexity. Once again, Thomas draws our attention to the important relationships between theological ontology and theological semantics. The poem's speaker does not understand that Christ, through His 'iconicity', *is* God; thus, instead of listening to the supplications of the Son, he erroneously submits that either the Father does not exist or that He is purposefully malevolent.

The hypostatic union *is* Christianity, a point which John Barnie does not seem to appreciate. Reviewing *Neb* in *Planet*, Barnie wrote that in Thomas's poetry:

there is little mention of Christ, the mediator of God's *caritas* to fallen humanity [...] this God is necessarily remote, manifesting himself through a nature which is non-human. Such moments are a gift of grace but not an expression of *caritas*, which is mediated to humanity through Christ the Son. No wonder, in Christian tradition, Christ figures so prominently, for he can forgive what the poet in the image of his silent God cannot.<sup>139</sup>

However, regarding the first part of this comment, it is simply untrue to say that Christ scarcely figures in Thomas's work. As early as *The Stones of the Field*, for example, we read of Tomos listening to the 'first warbler' on Easter Day ('An Airy Tomb', *SF*, 42-6), and there is also the

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<sup>138</sup> Richard Kearney gives an intriguing analysis of ontological, eschatological, and what he terms 'onto-eschatological' interpretations of Exodus 3: 14 in *The God Who May Be*, 22-38. Kearney's own position is that, 'God does not reveal himself [...] as an essence [...] but as an I-Self for us. And the most appropriate mode of human response to this Exodic revelation is precisely that: *commitment to a response*. Such commitment shows Yahweh as God-the-agent, whose co-respondents, from Moses to the exilic prophets and Jesus, see themselves implicated in the revelation as receivers of a gift—a Word given by someone who calls them to cooperate with Him in his actions'. 29. This seems remarkably similar to Thomas's conception of the Exodic 'Name' throughout his later collections. Divinity is not some kind of metaphysical 'essence' requiring analysis, but is that which demands our 'cooperation' or commitment and *praxis*. Jesus *is* God and so, by *responding* to the Son, we necessarily respond also to the Father.

<sup>139</sup> 'Across the Grain', in *Planet* 56 (1986), 105-6.



‘suggestion of a peasant-Christ identification’, as Patrick Crotty describes it, through the tree metaphor in ‘The Face’ (*P*, 41).<sup>140</sup> Prior to 1986, Christ is also referred to, either overtly or obliquely, in the following poems: ‘The Musician’ (*T*, 19); ‘Pharisee. Twentieth Century’ (*T*, 38); ‘Pietà’ (*P*, 14); ‘In Church’ (*P*, 44); ‘The Priest’ (*NTHBF*, 29); ‘That’ (*NTHBF*, 44); ‘Song’ (*H*, 8); ‘Via Negativa’ (*H*, 16); ‘The Hearth’ (*H*, 18); ‘Female’ (*H*, 27); ‘Earth’ (*H*, 28); ‘The Coming’ (*H*, 35)—one of the most religiously ‘positive’ and profoundly ‘Christic’ poems Thomas ever wrote—‘The Hand’ (*LS*, 2); ‘Amen’ (*LS*, 5); ‘God’s Story’ (*LS*, 7); ‘The Prayer’ (*LS*, 10); ‘The Tool’ (*LS*, 11); ‘Poste Restante’ (*LS*, 13); ‘Mediations’ (*LS*, 17); ‘The Problem’ (*LS*, 22); ‘Ann Griffith’ (*LS*, 29); ‘The Moon in Lleyn’ (*LS*, 30); ‘Suddenly’ (*LS*, 32); ‘Rough’ (*LS*, 36); ‘The Annunciation by Veneziano’ (*LS*, 38); ‘Hill Christmas’ (*LS*, 42); ‘The Interrogation’ (*LS*, 63); ‘Pre-Cambrian’ (*F*, 23); ‘In Great Waters’ (*F*, 37); ‘Roger Bacon’ (*F*, 40); ‘The Answer’ (*F*, 46); ‘Epiphany’ (*F*, 50); ‘Directions’ (*BHN*, 81); ‘Waiting’ (*BHN*, 83); ‘Fair Day’ (*BHN*, 90); ‘Forest Dwellers’ (*BHN*, 108); ‘Covenanters’ (*LP*, 170); ‘The Cones’ (*LP*, 183); ‘Cadenza’ (*LP*, 185); ‘Contacts’ (*LP*, 197); ‘The Moment’ (*LP*, 200); ‘Father and Child. Ben Shahn’ (*IT*, 13). Regarding the second part of Barnie’s assertion, as the third chapter of this thesis attempted to demonstrate, God is only ‘silent’ in Thomas’s poetry in the sense that the poet emphasizes and explores the ways in which silence is God’s elected method of *discourse*; therefore, properly understood, Thomas’s God is not ‘silent’ at all.

Rowan Williams, in his short but fascinating book on Marian icons of the Eastern Christian tradition, makes the vital point that the icon represents ‘a transitional place, a borderland, where the completely foreign is brought together with the familiar. Here is somewhere that looks as if it belongs within the world we are at home in, but in fact it leads directly into strangeness’.<sup>141</sup> It is the icon’s propensity to cultivate what the Russian Formalists

<sup>140</sup> ‘Extraordinary Man of the Bald Welsh Hills: The Iago Prytherch Poems’, 38-9.

<sup>141</sup> Rowan Williams, *Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin Mary* (Norwich: Canterbury P., 2002), xiv. Williams remarks that the *Hodegetria* or the ‘she who shows the way’ form of Marian icon, demands the viewer’s ‘narrativized’ co-operation: ‘One of the most significant features of icons is the direction in which

called *ostranenie* which distinguishes it from the misrepresentative and intellectually-limiting tendencies of the idol. The icon, by ‘making strange’, coalesces ‘otherness’ with the recognizable; like metaphor, the icon functions as a site of symbiotic potentiality, leading us *to* truth by firstly *dissociating* us from truth.

In continuation of this idea, ‘I’ (*MHT*, 58) contends that proper understanding of the ‘grammar of God’ encourages receptivity to deific ‘immanence’ *and* ‘transcendence’:

Kierkegaard hinted, Heidegger  
 agreed: the nominative  
 is God, a clearing  
 in thought’s forest where truth  
  
 breathes, coming at us  
 like light itself, now  
 in waves from a great distance,  
 now in the intimacy of our corpuscles.

The God presented here is obviously not the ‘Deus Absconditus’, that unapproachable and antagonistic deity who is so often imputed to skulk at the heart of Thomas’s religious poetry.

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the eyes are drawn by gestures and lines. Thus, in the great Trinity icon of Andrei Rublev, the inclination of the heads and the (very muted) gestures of the hands tell us a great deal about what Rublev is saying—what he is ‘writing’, since Orthodox Christians speak of the ‘writing’, not the painting, of an icon—about the relations of the divine persons. In that sense, all icons ‘show a way’; they invite us to follow a line, a kind of little journey, in the picture. It is not, of course, a peculiarity of icons: there are plenty of great Western images that require something similar, most powerfully, perhaps, the Isenheim altar piece of Grünewald, with John the Baptist’s immensely elongated forefinger pointing towards the crucified. But in the icon, we are not talking about dramatic gestures that underline a point, but rather about the journey the eye has to take *around* the entire complex image: wherever you start, you are guided by the flow of lines, and the path travelled itself makes the ‘point’— though ‘point’ is quite the wrong word, suggesting as it does that the icon has one simple message to get across, rather than being an invitation to a continuing action of contemplating’. 4. The ekphrastic poems in *Between Here and Now and Ingrowing Thoughts* seem to stimulate comparable processes of visual ‘travelling’. Thomas’s iconotexts prompt us into different ways of seeing and therefore different methods of visual interpretation; they dramatize the narrative impulse and so show that the perceptual act is inherently *dynamic*.

In sharp contrast to the bewildered speaker in ‘Could Be’, the ‘speaker’ of this poem is *fully* aware that the Exodic ‘name’ is a statement of relationship and communion. The ‘I’ of the poem’s title is the “ ‘ehyeh ’asher ’ehyeh” of the Exodic narrative—‘I am he who is’—but the pronoun also clearly alludes to the ‘I’ of human selfhood (‘coming at us’/ ‘our corpuscles’), and so the text ultimately foregrounds the *symbiosis* of ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ and therefore the unbreakable *connections* between man and God. To quote Richard Kearney:

the nameless Name is not an *acquis* but a promissory note. Its self-disclosure is inextricably tied to Moses’ commission to go and announce to his fellow Hebrews their liberation and redemption. “You shall know that I am Yahweh your God, who frees you from the burden of the Egyptians...” Henceforth, Yahweh is to be experienced as a saving-enabling-promising God, a God whose performance will bear out his pledges. As Psalm 138 makes clear, “you have made your promised word well above your name.” It is worth repeating here that this eschatological promise is granted within an I-Thou relationship (of God with Moses), thereby indicating *two* sides to the promise, human *as well as* divine. The double relation in turn carries a dual responsibility not to become too distant or too familiar with God. Moses, remember, is summoned to approach, but also to remove his sandals and keep his distance. A safe distance, a sacred reserve. This twofold summons—come! but not too near!—is itself parallel to the shift from past to future. The revelation of Exodus 3: 14 thus marks a displacement from an ancestral deity (of magic, territory, and inheritance) to a salvific God who vows to free the faithful from bondage in Egypt and prize open the more universal horizon of a promised Land. Here God commits Himself to a kingdom of justice if His faithful commit themselves to

it too; the promise of Sinai calls forth a corresponding decision on behalf of the people.<sup>142</sup>

In Thomas's poem, despite the title, the nominative 'I' is superseded by the nominative 'we'. The concluding image underscores the sacramental energy ('you' are *literally* in 'us') of Eucharistic celebration. The blood of the sacrament merges proximity with distance and reconciles post-lapsarian man to the Father. The reference to Kierkegaard in particular, despite its epigrammatic texture, is also of substantial interest. Although it is more or less habitual to view Thomas as somehow 'Kierkegaardian' in his religious thinking, if he were *simply* Kierkegaardian then it is difficult to account for the sense of *divergence* from Kierkegaard in the poem's opening line. Kierkegaard, for example, concurs with Tertullian's famous argument that Athens (reason) has nothing whatsoever to do with Jerusalem (faith), and, if Thomas *were* indeed 'Kierkegaardian', then he would presumably agree with this contention. Reason has failed, therefore, of necessity, one must gird oneself for a leap of faith.<sup>143</sup> However, it is evident from many poems that Thomas does not hold an unambiguously 'Kierkegaardian' understanding of the faith-reason 'disjunction'. As we have seen, Thomas often appears to believe that faith is *profoundly* 'rational' and, if that is the case, then it cannot be true to say that he regards reason as theologically valueless.

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<sup>142</sup> *The God Who May Be*, 28-9.

<sup>143</sup> Tertullian phrases his argument through the form of a question: 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?' See *The Prescription Against Heretics*, trans. Peter Holmes, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1957), chapter 7. Cf. Gwenallt's poem written in memory of J. E. Daniel: 'Clymu dyneiddiaeth y Dadeni wrth ddiwinyddiaeth Drindodaidd./ A gosod diwinyddiaeth yr Eglwys yng nghanol argyfwng Cymru./ Clymu Caersalem ac Athen a Bangor'. Cited in A. M. Allchin *Praise Above All: Discovering the Welsh Tradition* (Cardiff: U. W. P., 1991), 140. Allchin says that 'For Gwenallt the principle of the incarnation is to be seen at work in all things. That means that the universal and the particular for him are always held together. [His] vision [is] of a complex but organic unity of human and divine, of temporal and eternal, of local and universal'. Ibid. In other words, Gwenallt's religious vision, like Thomas's it could be argued, is a symbiosis of human transience and deific permanency. Thus, critical appreciations of both poets' work must commence by stressing the theme of *plurality* in religious discernment.

Numerous poems by Thomas affirm the importance of ‘reason’ in theological judgement. The exigencies of space preclude detailed discussion, but the following poems are all concerned with the relationship between reason and faith: ‘Pharisee. Twentieth Century’ (*T*, 38); ‘Alpine’ (*T*, 44); ‘Within Sound of the Sea’ (*P*, 13); ‘Amen’ (*P*, 15); ‘Kierkegaard’ (*P*, 18)—of particular interest because in this poem Thomas’s metaphors of exertion and labouring suggest that knowledge of God is continually evolving—‘In Church’ (*P*, 44), where Thomas writes of the importance of ‘testing’ faith; ‘A Grave Unvisited’ (*NTHBF*, 9); ‘Llanrhaeadr ym Mochnant’ (*NTHBF*, 21); ‘Petition’ (*H*, 2); ‘This One’ (*H*, 3); ‘Period’ (*H*, 6); ‘No Answer’ (*H*, 7); ‘Emerging’ (*LS*, 1); ‘Relay’ (*LS*, 9); ‘The Prayer’ (*LS*, 10); ‘The Problem’ (*LS*, 22); ‘Probing’ (*LS*, 23); ‘The Combat’ (*LS*, 43); ‘Somewhere’ (*LS*, 46); ‘The Listener in the Corner’ (*WI*, 16); ‘In Context’ (*F*, 13); ‘Night Sky’ (*F*, 18); ‘Adjustments’ (*F*, 29); ‘Perhaps’ (*F*, 39); ‘Emerging’ (*F*, 41); ‘Synopsis’ (*F*, 44); ‘Balance’ (*F*, 49); ‘Inside’ (*LP*, 199); ‘Destinations’ (*D*, 17); ‘Apostrophe’ (*EA*, 9); ‘The Wood’ (*EA*, 16); ‘Strands’ (*EA*, 32); ‘Approaches’ (*EA*, 55); ‘This One’ (*EA*, 58); ‘Cures’ (*EA*, 66); *ERS*, 33; 39; 42; 72; 81; *C*, 31. These texts are all centred upon the importance of using ‘reason’ to ‘test’ or to ‘adjust’ faith; reason helps us to explore faith, for it is only by (rationally) clarifying the axioms of faith, that we can eliminate *false* axioms or recalibrate *ambiguous* axioms.

In *Mass for Hard Times* several poems explore the complicated interplay between faith and reason in theological discernment. ‘Bleak Liturgies’ (*MHT*, 59-63), for example, begins by affirming the interconnections between religious belief and language:

Shall we revise the language?

And in revising the language

will we alter the doctrine?

Do we seek to plug the hole  
 in faith with faith's substitute  
 grammar?

The puns abound once more. If we adjust our religious language to take account of modernity then will we still be able to 'altar' our belief, or will our alternative grammar of praise convert us all to doubting Thomas's, seeking not to confirm Christ's divinity but to reject it? Like the sceptical Apostle, Thomas seems to linger here between conviction and hesitancy. We *may* require liturgical 'reconstruction' but liturgical reconstruction may also invalidate that which it was intended to confirm.<sup>144</sup> It is important to note, however, the poem's controlling diction of intellectual *progression*. Thomas is aware that men are intellectually malleable and, furthermore, he also knows that although 'reason' may lead us into bewilderment, reason will also serve as our liberator:

As one by one  
 the witnesses died off  
 they commended their metaphors  
  
 to our notice. For two thousand  
 years the simplistic recipients  
 of the message pointed towards  
  
 the reductionist solution. We devise

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<sup>144</sup> Of course, we know from 'A Year in Llŷn' that Thomas heartily despised the Church's reformation of liturgical practice (see *Autobiographies*, 131), so by 'liturgical reconstruction' I mean a *revitalized* understanding of the human-divine relationship as explicated and explored through liturgy.

an idiom more compatible with  
the furniture departments of our churches.

As in ‘Not the empty tomb’ (C, 37) with its withering argument that ‘We have overfurnished/ our faith’, the opening stanzas of ‘Bleak Liturgies’ contrast the intellectual perspicacity of the original Christians with the shallowness of current theological understanding. St. Paul knew full well that Calvary must not be reduced to the distortive literalism of human concepts—‘your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God’ (1 Corinthians 2: 5)—nevertheless, as the poem maintains, we continually replace ‘non-literality’ with the intellectual speciousness of reductionist explanation. The pun on ‘commended’ reinforces the point. Christ ‘commends’ His spirit to the Father (Luke 23: 46) and the Evangelists and Paul ‘commend’ their non-literal or ‘metaphorical’ comprehensions of Christ to us. Human presumption, however, exchanges the intellectually difficult poetry of the Gospels and Pauline epistles for blunt and diminishing literalness. As Thomas himself comments:

We do not have hard historical evidence for the resurrection of Christ. What we have are the words of the gospels and Saint Paul. They had a strange experience. They believed that the risen Christ had appeared to them. Accordingly, they sought to transmit their vision to future ages through the medium of words. If we have not had a vision of the risen Christ, we have to accept the verbal evidence of the Evangelists. But language is a symbol, a description of something in terms of something else. And, for R. S., that was the meaning of metaphor too.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> *Autobiographies*, 84.

It is helpful to gloss this passage with a quotation from Saunders Lewis. Commenting on D. Z. Phillips's assessment that 'Terminal Prayer' (1973) was not an anti-religious, or, more precisely, an anti-Catholic poem, Lewis wrote:

I was extremely glad that he refutes the idea that it is an atheistic poem [...] What is sad is that it is only thus, that it is through the figurative or through images, that we can portray or put before the mind's eye that faith of the Christian. For it is the Resurrection and the Ascension which are the foundation and warrant of our Hope. But what is the "Ascension"? What is it for us today? A symbol of the Unity of God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit in the salvation and guidance of the creation [...] But, as we assert things about the spiritual, the eternal, about the Trinity which is an unfathomable Unity, and which sustains every being which exists through its "Word", is it not our language, our imagery, our talk of "sitting on the right hand" of necessity terribly, pitifully "comic"? How can we be adequate for the tasks with the language at our disposal?<sup>146</sup>

It is clear from the above that Thomas and Lewis appear to share parallel views (although not perhaps identical ones) regarding the use of religious language. Metaphor bequeaths us truth but human presumption strips metaphor of its explanatory power, and it is Thomas's disparagement of such presumption which forms the thematic centre of 'Bleak Liturgies'. To gloss the text by means of a later poem, Thomas writes in 'Homage to Wallace Stevens' (*NTF*, 62-3) that he, Thomas, 'stand[s] with my back to grammar'. William V. Davis

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<sup>146</sup> *Saunders Lewis: A Presentation of his Work*, ed. Harri Pritchard Jones (Illinois: Templegate, 1991), 26.



interprets the line to mean that ‘in turning to God, as priest, [Thomas] turns away from the mundane and the human, or even that he turns away from man’s grammatical rules of literature and language— all for the sake of a sacred ceremony’.<sup>147</sup> To some extent this is true, but we should also observe that in the later poem Thomas is interested in emphasizing what he describes as Stevens’s ‘double-entry/ poetics’, that is, the American’s *synthesis* of the ‘literal’ or ‘grammatical’ with the ‘imaginative’ or ‘metaphorical’. The first stanza, for instance, is bustling with images which combine modes of expression with what the expression *itself* delivers or denotes: ‘His adjectives/ are the wand he waves/ so language gets up/ and dances’; ‘acrobat walking a rhythmic tight-rope/ trapeze artist of the language’; ‘He burned his metaphors like incense,/ so his syntax was as high/ as his religion’. Given this eruption of ‘composite’ images, when Thomas ‘repudiates’ grammar and faces instead ‘an altar [Stevens] never aspired to’, it seems more likely he is arguing for a *regeneration* of religious language rather than claiming that religious language is superfluous in regard to ‘sacred ceremony’.

The second section of ‘Bleak Liturgies’ establishes an equivalent theme:

Instead of the altar  
 the pulpit. Instead  
 of the bread the fraction  
 of the language [...]  
 Their prayers  
 are a passing of hands  
 over their brows as though  
 in an effort to wipe sin  
 off.

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<sup>147</sup> R. S. Thomas: *Poetry and Theology*, 156.

In these lines, it is obvious that language *itself* has not failed. Instead of embracing sacramental celebration—which can only be done in words—the communicants diminish both the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist to a ‘fraction’ of what such prayers actually entail. Moreover, man’s juvenile comprehension of the salvation narrative means that prayer ceases to function as colloquy and becomes complacent self-righteousness: we cannot wipe away Original Sin any more than Cain can erase the mark of damnation from his forehead.<sup>148</sup> As in ‘One Life’ (*MHT*, 56), which forcefully instructs that ‘Growing up/ is to leave the fireside/ with its tales,/ the burying of the head/ between God’s knees’, ‘Bleak Liturgies’ foregrounds the correlations between semantics, theological ontology, and religious maturity: ‘Is/ to grow up to destroy/ childhood’s painting of one/ who was nothing but vocabulary’s shadow?’ The capacity to reason *must* be fostered if one is to advance in theological intelligence:

The gaps in belief are filled  
with ceremonies and processions.  
  
The organ’s whirlwind follows  
upon the still, small voice  
  
of conviction, and he is not  
  
in it.

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<sup>148</sup> Cf. the conclusion of ‘Aim’ (*EA*, 64) where,

Ieuan Morgan, his mind  
in a sling, goes on his way  
past the crouched chapel,  
its doors barrels levelled  
on him out of the last  
century, neither knowing nor caring  
whether he is a marked man.

One cannot hope to plug the lacunae in religious understanding with mere process. The desire to replace difficult theological content with the comfortable practice of ritual and pageantry must always be resisted. The congregation—and, indeed, Thomas himself, as the poem is also self-condemnatory—may sing the verses from Whittier’s famous hymn, but unlike Elijah who responded with due humility to God’s ‘still, small voice’ (1 Kings 19: 12-3) they remain steadfastly egoistical. The poem is teeming with theism-godlessness juxtapositions: ‘Their buildings/ are in praise of concrete/ and macadam’; ‘On saints’/ days the cross and// shackles were the jewellery/ of the rich’; ‘Salvation accelerates/ with the times. It is a race between/ Jesus and Lenin’; ‘Crosses/ are mass-produced’; ‘The communicants jeans,/ the whiskered faces with/ their imitation of Christ?’ This last image, the first two clauses of which are also used in ‘Coming’ (*EA*, 5)—‘To be crucified/ again? To be made friends/ with for his jeans and beard?’—is particularly compelling.<sup>149</sup> Thomas à Kempis argues that salvation is dependent on disavowal—‘as the absence of craving for material things makes for inner peace, so does the forsaking of self unite man’s heart to God’<sup>150</sup>—yet the communicants in the poem wish to ‘imitate’ Christ whilst simultaneously rejecting His self-abjuration: ‘If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me’ (Matthew 16: 24). It is by

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<sup>149</sup> Thomas combines the two images, ‘Crosses/ are mass-produced’, ‘The communicants jeans/ the whiskered faces’, in ‘Similarities’, (*EA*, 24): ‘While the youth with hair/ on his chest flaunted a tin/ cross’. Cf. also ‘This One’ (*H*, *m* 3) which contrasts the triteness of contemporary religious understanding with the kind of plain yet stoic endurance typified by the Prytherch-figure:

Oh, I know it: the long story,  
The ecstasies, the mutilations;  
Crazed, pitiable creatures  
Imagining themselves a Napoleon,  
A Jesus; letting their hair grow [...]

While patiently this poor farmer  
Purged himself in his strong sweat,  
Ploughing under the tall boughs  
Of the tree of the knowledge of  
Good and evil, watching its fruit  
Ripen, abstaining from it.

<sup>150</sup> *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price (London: Penguin Classics, 1952), chapter 56.

showing what *false* ‘reason’ can lead to that we begin to appreciate truth, and, since truth stems from the rational analysis of concepts—even Kierkegaard, we must remember, arrived at his ‘fideistic’ position by means of speculative philosophy—it must follow that reason is *essential* to theological knowledge. ‘Athens’, in this sense, has *everything* to do with ‘Jerusalem’, for Jerusalem can only be fully apprehended if we firstly recognise the bogus conclusions to which ‘reason’ has directed us. Reason may limit consciousness, yet the *rational* understanding of consciousness can still overcome ‘reason’.<sup>151</sup>

The final stanzas of ‘Bleak Liturgies’ provide a dénouement to the theological anxieties and existential predicaments explored throughout the poem:

Is there another way  
of engaging? There are those who,  
  
thinking of him in the small hours  
as eavesdropping their hearts  
and challenging him to come forth,  
  
have found, as the day dawned,  
his body hanging upon the crossed tree  
of man, as though he were man, too.

Reiterating the earlier argument of ‘the need, as always, of a third/ Way’ (‘Remedies’, *H*, 24) the poem’s concluding images foreground the ‘breaking-through’ of a new method of religious

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<sup>151</sup> Cf. the opening and closing lines of ‘Jerusalem’ (*EA*, 47): ‘A city— its name/ keeps it intact. Don’t/ touch it [...] Time// devourer of its children/ chokes here on the fact/ it is in high places love/ condescends to be put to death’. In this poem, the personification at the end stresses the Johannine definition ‘Deus est Caritas’, and so the opening metonymy of Jerusalem as ‘pure belief’ is not a simplistic affirmation of fideism.

thinking.<sup>152</sup> The soul's dark night is pierced at last by the moment of illumination: 'Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life' (John 8: 12). In both imagery and theme, the final stanzas are extremely similar to the three quatrains of 'The Moment' (*LP*, 206):

Is the night dark? His interiors  
 are darker, more perilous  
 to enter. Are there whispers  
 abroad? They are the communing

with himself our destiny  
 is to be outside of, listeners  
 at our breath's window. Is there  
 an ingredient in him of unlove?

It is the moment in the mind's  
 garden he resigns himself  
 to his own will to conceive the tree  
 of manhood we have reared against him.

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<sup>152</sup> This is merely conjectural, but it may be that Thomas's interest in the relationship between 'commitment', faith, and poetry, was prompted by his studies at St. Michael's College, Llandaff. The ethos of the College was sturdily Tractarian and, according to the historian Owen Chadwick, 'it is right to see the Oxford Movement as an impulse of the heart and the conscience, not an inquiry of the head [...] the Oxford Movement was one part of that great swing of opinion against Reason as the Age of Reason had understood it [...] They wanted to find a place for the poetic or the aesthetic judgement; their hymnody shared in the feelings and evocations of the romantic poets; they wished to find a place and value for historical tradition [...] they suspected the reason of common sense as shallow'. *The Mind of the Oxford Movement*, ed. & introduced by Owen Chadwick (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1960), 12. For a history of the College, see Owain W. Jones, *Saint Michael's College, Llandaff 1892-1992* (Llandysul: Gomer P., 1992). Unfortunately, the content of the syllabus Thomas studied is unknown. The College was bombed by the Luftwaffe on January 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1941, and large stores of documents were obliterated.

In each poem, Thomas emphasizes the Council of Chalcedon's affirmation that Christ is fully human *and* fully divine. Additionally, both texts underscore the crucial premise that divinity is best approached by emancipating the imagination. In the earlier poem, Thomas substitutes the 'doctrinaire' paradigm of God as 'Deus Absconditus' with the historical *immediacy* of the Crucifixion, while 'Bleak Liturgies' concludes with the assertion that creativity is the lodestar of theological thought: '*as though* he were man'. The simile fortifies the 'symbolic' or 'iconic' understanding of Christ which the later Thomas appears to pursue. Christ *is* God, but since God repudiates 'predication', to 'think' God non-predicatively means to 'think' Christ via the unifying power of imagery or iconicity: 'there are two sides to existence [...] the transcendental and the subordinate, as it were. It is an abysmal rift that exists between those who seek to exalt life and those who want to reduce it to the "bare facts", as they term them. "Life is nothing but..." they say. But this won't do...' <sup>153</sup> It is insufficient to possess a one-eyed view of divinity in a religion which calls for double vision and the icon, through its proclivity to dissociate *and* converge, provides us with an intellectual mechanism with which to fully perceive the Christic mystery: *Gloria Dei homo vivens; visio Dei vita hominis.* <sup>154</sup>

The icon, according to A. M. Allchin:

shows us the serenity and fullness of heaven in and through the limitations and constraints of earth. It opens up a window on to an eternal realm, constituting a "calculated trap for meditation", a prismatic glass through which we may catch sight of things otherwise invisible. In particular the icon invites us to enter in and share in the reality which it portrays. This is the meaning of the reversed perspective which the painter uses, which projects the figure towards us. This,

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<sup>153</sup> *Autobiographies*, 131.

<sup>154</sup> 'The glory of God is a living man; the life of man is the vision of God'. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, Book 4, chapter 20. Cited in John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Early Christian Studies, 2000), 56.

too, is the reason why the saints are always depicted looking directly at us, coming out to meet us. When we stand in front of an icon we are not as in an art gallery, simply spectators, even if deeply interested ones. We are called to become participants in what we see and to learn through our participation.<sup>155</sup>

Stressing as it does the icon's ability to synthesize, disclose, tutor, and stimulate, Allchin's analysis is as multifaceted as it is insightful. The icon requires our *involvement* in order for it to function at all, and in 'The Lost' (*MHT*, 78), a poem about gnosis and the ways in which religious truth must be grasped and cherished, Thomas reproaches those who separate the Christian life from the accompanying *commitment* which such a life demands:

Mourners after the shadows  
they are deprived of  
by an absence of light [...]

They are beyond the reach  
even of an Amen. The Grand  
Inquisitor's countenance

is averted. Jesus'  
too? The bread of the one  
and the freedom of the other

offer no more light

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<sup>155</sup> *Praise Above All: Discovering the Welsh Tradition*, 154.

to the nameless than does  
the mildew forming upon both.

Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor insists that fallen humanity cannot battle temptation; nevertheless, the self-interested man is still committed to *something*. The subjects in Thomas's poem disdain both the egocentric impulse and the self-sacrifice demanded by Christianity. They do not succumb to appetite, but neither do they accept the freedom to choose between good and evil. Eliot, in his essay on Baudelaire, describes the ethical alternatives with which the Christian is confronted by means of a crisp explanation of evil's enigmatic allure: 'So far as we are human, what we do must be either good or evil; so far as we do evil or good, we are human; and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing; at least, we exist'.<sup>156</sup> Ivan Karamazov regards God, if He exists at all, as despotic and spiteful—'But if, as you say, he exists,/ and what I do is an offence/ to him, let him punish me:/ I shall not squeal' ('Ivan Karamazov', *LS*, 39)—but at least Karamazov is willing to live and think according to his convictions. In 'The Lost', Thomas presents us with a vision of Purgatorial nothingness, a non-place in which people, like Eliot's hollow men, reduce all existence to inconsequentiality and purposelessness. Christ offers us the freedom to choose between good and evil and in that sense He also requests our uninhibited *dedication* to Him: 'If ye continue in my word, then ye are my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free' (John 8: 31-2). Difficult truth versus contented apathy: these are the alternatives which the Christian must eventually encounter. Religion is dependent on faith and reason, but faith and reason are themselves dependent on—'Abercuawg-like'—existential commitment: 'meaning/ is not in having but *trying*' ('Afon Rhiw', *MHT*, 79. My emphasis). Christianity is not some off the peg

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<sup>156</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Baudelaire', in *Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward (Harmondsworth, Middx: Penguin, 1955), 194.



comfort blanket but demands, as the quotation from Allchin maintains, reenergised *participation* in its central mysteries.

#### IV

In *No Truce with the Furies* (1995), the last collection compiled by Thomas himself, several poems reaffirm that ‘self-revitalization’ is the mandatory counterpart to theological understanding. ‘Fathoms’ (*NTF*, 10), for example, through a variation of the ‘Kierkegaardian-cum-reflections’ metaphor, suggests that resilient *application* underpins existential discovery:

dissolution,  
 nothing but the self  
 looking up at the self  
 looking down, with each  
 refusing to become  
 an object, so with the Dane’s  
 help, from bottomless fathoms  
 I dredge up the truth.

William V. Davis argues that in this poem and in ‘S.K.’ (*NTF*, 15-17), Thomas is foregrounding the ‘Other’. Accordingly, Davis sees the poem as a rumination upon fractured selfhood:

In addition to the suggestion of a bifurcated self there also seems to be in these lines [of ‘Fathoms’] a second self, an Other, or another “self”, that, as Thomas looks “up”, looks “down” at him [...] Thomas [in ‘S. K.’] seems to suggest that prayer *is* a “glass,” a mirror, and that that glass, stared into long enough or looked at hard enough, may finally begin to clear, and to suggest the possibility

of a presence in it— a “countenance... other than our own” This “presence” is simultaneously present and absent. It is an “Other” that is both self and other; an “Other” that may well be God; an “Other” who, although not present, is present as absence, in the centre of man’s—or at least of R. S. Thomas’s—mind.<sup>157</sup>

The problem with the first of these readings, is that if Thomas is proposing ‘a bifurcated self’ in ‘Fathoms’, then why would he conclude the poem with an image which appears to *shatter* the previous ‘self as a hall of mirrors’ images: ‘I dredge up the truth’? The physically energetic verb, with its connotations of laboriously sifting through silt in the expectation of eventually discovering something, is semantically ‘opposed’ to the water-mirror imagery of the previous lines. In the poem, water and mirrors only provide opaque reflections, whereas the discovery of ‘real’ truth is dependent on determination and hard work. In regard to Davis’s reading of ‘S. K.’, although he stresses that prayer requires perseverance, he seems to succumb to the ‘God as (Other) being’ archetype. If one prays long enough, Davis appears to be arguing, one will, in due course, somehow ‘see’ God. This ignores the *reciprocal* nature of the ‘I’-‘Thou’ relationship which the poem’s final stanza obviously asserts. One can only pray truthfully if one appreciates ‘the exchange/ of places between I and thou’’, and to do this requires a ‘difficult’ paradigm shift from ‘I’ and ‘Thou’, to ‘we’ and ‘us’. The ninth stanza of ‘Anybody’s Alphabet’ (*NTF*, 89) encapsulates the same theme from a specifically ‘non-ontological’ perspective:

The I as idea  
incarnate, inimical

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<sup>157</sup> R. S. Thomas: *Poetry and Theology*, 81-3.

to the impartial, infinite  
 in the intensity of its  
 opposition to the incursions  
 of an implicit Thou.

Because we entertain an ontologically-formulated ‘idea’ of God, we misunderstand our relationship *to* God: we can never make ‘incursions’ into God’s ‘nature’ *because* we regard Him as a ‘person’.

The argument that harsh intellectual labour (‘I *dredge* up the truth’) is a prerequisite to authentic self-detection is repeated throughout the volume. In ‘S. K.’, the book’s second Kierkegaardian-themed poem, we are told that prayer requires tenacity and diligence:

Is prayer  
 not a glass that, beginning  
 in obscurity as his books  
 do, the longer we stare  
 into the clearer becomes  
 the reflection of a countenance  
 in it other than our own?

Similarly, in ‘The Pearl’ (*NTF*, 18), the following poem in the collection, existential awareness is dependent upon exertion—‘there is no pearl without price’—whilst ‘Wrong?’ (*NTF*, 26) concludes by asserting that in order to ‘locate’ divinity we must firstly acquire the correct ‘state’ of mind:

I feel rather  
 you are at our shoulder [...]  
 cautioning us  
 to prepare not for the breathless journeys  
 into confusion, but for the stepping  
 aside through the invisible  
 veil that is about us into a state  
 not place of innocence and delight.

In these poems, we perceive that Christian consciousness does not depend upon moments of pseudo-mystical ‘transcendence’, but is rooted in effort, concentration and perseverance.<sup>158</sup> Even in texts with such ostensibly ‘numinous’ themes as ‘Riposte’ (*NTF*, 23)—which can be seen as a companion piece to ‘And this little finger says’ (*ERS*, 37)—and ‘The Indians and the Elephant’ (*NTF*, 48), Thomas accentuates the rationality and dynamism of authentic religious thinking. In the former poem, although the speaker concedes that ‘God withdraws [...] at the moment of illumination’, his conclusion is only arrived at by means of rational discussion. In the latter text, Thomas, placing himself directly into the text, acknowledges that God must be

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<sup>158</sup> The two final lines of ‘Wrong?’ may allude to More’s *Utopia*. *Outopía* or *Ūtopia*, we must remember, is ‘no-place-land’ as well as ‘good-place-land’, so perhaps Thomas is suggesting that, although ‘innocence and delight’ will never be achieved, we should not relinquish their pursuit. Cf. ‘Nuance’ (*NFT*, 32) which insists that ‘We must not despair’; the beautiful and moving conclusion to ‘At the End’ (*NTF*, 42), ‘I who/ have been made free/ by the tide’s pendulum truth/ that the heart that is low now/ will be at the full tomorrow’; and the extended metaphor of God as a bird in ‘Bird Watching’ (*NTF*, 61):

Winged God  
 approve that in a world  
 that has appropriated flight  
 to itself there are still people  
 like us, who believe  
 in the ability of the heart  
 to migrate, if only momentarily,  
 between the quotidian and the sublime.

‘explored’.<sup>159</sup> As ‘Swallows’ (*NFT*, 49), the poem facing ‘The Indians and the Elephant’ confirms, Thomas regards himself as ‘a migrant/ between nominatives’—the image obviously re-establishing ‘the nominative/ is God’ trope of ‘I’ (*MHT*, 58)—and so, by extension, he must hold that divinity is best apprehended through a dialectically-structured symbiosis of ‘I’-‘Thou’-‘We’. The semantic ‘slipperiness’ of the interlaced pronouns does not suggest ‘separation’ or ‘dissolution’ but synthesis and interdependence: ‘The difficulty/ with prayer is *the exchange/ of places* between I and thou’ (‘S. K’).

The essential characteristic of the religious icon, whether we conceive of it as ‘a prismatic glass’ (Allchin) or as a type of ‘borderland’ (Williams), is its capacity to provoke existential commitment through perceptual and intellectual *revitalization*:

I’ve tried to write out of that experience of God, the fantastic side of God, the quarrel between the conception of God as a person, as having a human side, and the conception of God as being so extraordinary [...] I’m trying to appeal to people to *open their eyes and their minds* to the extraordinary nature of God.<sup>160</sup>

Although, as Exodus informs us, no man can see God and live (33: 20), it does not follow from this that God is either ‘hidden’ or ‘unknowable’: ‘No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him’ (John 1: 18). In a comparable manner to the Johannine text, Thomas’s comment to Price-Owen combines a

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<sup>159</sup> Regarding ‘The Indians and the Elephant’ Christopher Morgan writes: ‘the whole tone of the poem modulates from the comic to the mystical [...] There is a marked absence of ontological certainty in the narrator’s ongoing explorations that can be countered only by trust in the necessary and complete surrender he is forced to make in his terrifying experience of a deity which is without boundary and beyond control’. *R. S. Thomas: Identity, Environment, and Deity*, 117. This seems to interpret the poem the wrong way about. An ‘absence of ontological certainty’ is *positive* when ‘thinking’ divinity, for if one were certain on the ‘subject’ of God’s ‘nature’, then one would be capitulating to mere egotism. When discussing Thomas’s alleged projection of the ‘Deus Absconditus’, it is crucially important to recall the pivotal Exodic text: ‘Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live’ (33: 20).

<sup>160</sup> ‘R. S. Thomas in Conversation’. Interview with Molly Price-Owen, in *The David Jones Journal* (2001), 97-8. My emphasis.

theology of the Cross with a request for existential and epistemic liberation. Judgements about God are dependent on emancipating the mind in order to *live* the paradoxical revelation of Christ crucified. It is by teaching ourselves how to think ‘through’, to appropriate Allchin’s ‘prismatic glass’ metaphor, the Incarnation, the Passion and the Resurrection, that we come to understand divinity, and divinity must not be diminished to some onto-theological ‘concept’ but experienced as the overwhelming reality of Christic love.

‘Heretics’ (*NTF*, 29) critiques the various ways in which theological semantics may disfigure theological thought:

Man has to believe  
something. May as well invest  
in this creed as in that.  
Parthenogenesis! the door was flung  
open to proliferation:  
Nicaea, Chalcedon. The divine  
blood dried in the libraries;  
but the pages fornicated  
with the contradictory words [...]  
Alas, we are heretics  
all, and the one we subscribe to  
is not love any more than the kingdom  
for the sake of which we are  
fools is the kingdom of heaven.

The poem is robustly satirical. Both the celebrant and the congregation replace difficult truth—the ‘*perplexities* of Nicaea’ (*C*, 12)—with one-dimensional doctrine: ‘the worn formulae/ of the churches’ (‘Silence’, *NTF*, 83). They do not *attend* to the Word, but seek to supplant it with baseless philosophizing: ‘So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God’ (Romans 10:17). Once more, Thomas propounds the theme of existential indifference superseding existential commitment through the trope of ‘becoming foolish for Christ’. For even the self-professed Christian, it is far easier to live in the kingdom of men than embrace the Christian life: ‘strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there will be that find it’ (Matthew 7: 14).<sup>161</sup> Christian truth will not be discovered through mere receptiveness to dogma but is dependent upon self-examination and existential engagement. *Real* religious thinking, as Thomas writes in ‘Sonata in X’ (*MHT*, 81-5)—and does so through an especially delightful pun on ‘navel’—requires the demolition of hitherto accepted religious paradigms:

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<sup>161</sup> Christ’s famous metaphor is perhaps the origin of ‘Illusory Arrival’ (*NTF*, 30) and the twentieth stanza of ‘Anybody’s Alphabet’ (*NTF*, 91):

Who was the janitor  
with the set face, wardening  
the approaches? I had prepared  
my apologies, my excuses

for coming by the wrong  
road. There was no one  
there, only the way  
I had come by going on and on. (‘Illusory Arrival’)

True to type travelling  
towards truth and turning  
too often aside. There are the thoroughfares  
and the thousands of  
no-through-roads which we take. (‘Anybody’s Alphabet’)

The former poem also combines the earlier theme of ‘the need, as always, of a third/ Way’ (‘Remedies’, *H’m*, 24)—as remarked, a theme reiterated in ‘Bleak Liturgies’, ‘Is there another way/ of engaging?’ (*MHT*, 63)—with the Eliotian ‘stasis as motion’ theme of ‘Where do we go from here?’: ‘May it not be that alongside us, made invisible by the thinnest of veils, is the heaven we seek? [...] It is even closer. It is within us, as Jesus said. That is why there is no need to go anywhere from here’. *Selected Prose*, 151-2.

My introspection

could have been called a navel

engagement [...]

My apostrophes were to myself

only. I found, when I leaned

closer, the second person

did not exist.

If one replaces Christian commitment with doctrine, one's thinking will inevitably collapse into secularism and solipsism. Hopeful 'apostrophes' to God merely rebound upon the speaker. 'Reflections' (*NTF*, 31) establishes that the true appreciation of Eucharistic celebration—in which one literally forms 'communion' with 'the second person'—is premised upon participation, praxis and, above all, *self*-revelation:

It is a chalice

held out to you in

silent communion, where gaspingly

you partake of a shifting

identity never your own.





sacrament. Thomas is certainly using the imagery of sacramental communion in order to explore ‘multiple elusive identities’, as Morgan terms them,<sup>164</sup> but the poet also seems to be foregrounding the intensely *liberating* nature of the sacrament itself. Christ’s ‘shifting/identity’ is ‘fixed’ and ‘secured’, as it were, within the temporal-eternal ‘bind’ of the Eucharist. It is only at the moment of communion that we participate fully in the extraordinary gift of Christ’s divinity, that we become aware of Christic uniqueness, of an ‘identity never [our] own’: ‘The Eucharist requires of whoever approaches it a radical conceptual self-critique and charges him with *renewing* his norms of thought’.<sup>165</sup> In this sense, the theme of the poem appears to be that of self-investigation with the aim of existential ‘deliverance’. Sacramental theology *can* make sense of ‘the fantastic side of God’, but only if we open our eyes and our minds ‘to the extraordinary nature of God’.<sup>166</sup>

The interlocking of sacramental and Christic motifs is also present in ‘Incarnations’ (NTF, 35-7). This complicated poem seems to argue that man’s greatest limitation is his rationalistic (which is not to be confused with ‘reason’) view of existence. Here, Thomas once again envisages true religious thinking as gradual and osmotic; it advances steadily towards a new ‘incarnation’, but can only do so by undermining the intellectual frameworks which have

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>165</sup> *God Without Being*, 163. My emphasis.

<sup>166</sup> Cf. Allchin’s comments on the *Anima Christi* poem of Dafydd ap Gwilym in *God’s Presence Makes the World*, 55-60. It is extremely interesting that Allchin sees the last lines of the poem as an *interaction* between apophatic and cataphatic conceptions of divinity: ‘The last two lines of the poem are particularly untranslatable: *Gwlad uchelrad feithrad faeth/ Gwledd ddiwagedd ddiwygiaeth*. The first word of the last line but one, *gwlad*, land, corresponds to the first word of the last line, *gwledd*, feast. Both land and feast promise us gifts of eternity. The first of the two lines follows the affirmative way. It speaks of a land which is gift, which is grace, which is nourishing, which is lasting. The last line follows the apophatic or negative way. It speaks of a feast which is without emptiness, *ddiwagedd*, which must mean fulfilled. But what is fulfilled? The word is *ddiwygiaeth*. This is the only recorded occurrence of this word in Welsh; it looks as though Dafydd may have invented it for the occasion. It could mean form or perfection, it is also possible that it could mean transformation; it is related to the word for revival or transformation. I believe that this transformation is what the poet had in mind. He takes up the thought of the previous line which speaks of the long nurturing of grace and carries it further. The feast of the kingdom is *no static fulfilment; it is a fulfilment which is always in progress, always going forward*. As Pantycelyn was to see four centuries later, the feast of heaven is not the end but always the beginning of a song, the beginning of praise. It is an ever new beginning, an ever increasing dawn. The intuition of Gregory of Nyssa, that eternal life is something which is open-ended, an infinite progress into a life which is by definition infinite, comes to new life here’. 58-9. My emphasis. Dafydd regards the Eucharist, in other words, as that which stimulates new *modes* of thought, a view which seems almost identical with Thomas’s ideas regarding the same sacrament in ‘Reflections’.

preceded it. The poem begins, like the first prose passage in *The Echoes Return Slow*, by drawing attention to the genesis of thought, 'A child's memories/ are of the womb'. The secular images, however, are promptly overlaid with Christic reference points:

His whickering disordered  
 the stars, then silence took over,  
 twelve dawdling years  
 on the way to the temple.

Take one from one  
 there remain three.  
 No, no, no.

The lines are reminiscent of the opening to the first poem in the 'INCARNATION' section of *Counterpoint*:

Were you one of the three  
 came travelling to the workshop  
 with your gifts of heart, mind and soul  
 to the newly born in its cradle?

Was that a halo above it  
 of molecules and electrons,  
 with the metal gone hoarse trying  
 to reiterate: Holy. Holy. Holy?

In both texts Thomas juxtaposes the *fact* of the Incarnation with man's refusal to accept it. The *No Truce with the Furies* poem shows human intellect struggling with the theology of Trinitarianism, while the text in *Counterpoint* converts the strident affirmation of the Sanctus into disconcerted hesitation: 'Holy. Holy. Holy?' The two texts are also similar in that they portray Christ as the 'Alpha and Omega' as witnessed by John of Patmos (Revelation 22: 13). The fourth 'INCARNATION' poem in *Counterpoint* has the infant Christ 'secret[ing] the tree/ they would hang his body on' (C, 27), while the fourth stanza of 'Incarnations' declares that, 'The way forward/ was the way back/ to a carpenter's patience'. Both poems present the Incarnation as that which unites present with future and future with past, thereby revealing again the 'eschatological' focus of Thomas's imagination. The anthropomorphism of God 'dreaming' in the tenth stanza of 'Incarnations' is also used in *Counterpoint* 16, 'Winter' (MHT, 41), and 'The Gap' (F, 7-8). As is usual in Thomas, anthropomorphisms such as these display the tensions in our religious thinking; although Scripture tells us that God is not a 'likeness' of ourselves, we find it extremely difficult to conceive of Him in any other way.

In 'Incarnations', a dominant chord of the later religious poetry is struck once again. If one desires to bear witness to the Christ-child, one must firstly enflame 'nativities of the spirit' (ERS, 84). 'Divided/ mind, the message is always/ in two parts. Must it be/ on a cross it is made one?' ('Voices', BHN, 91). Despite the inquisitorial tone, the question is, in point of fact, fundamentally rhetorical. For the Christian, there *is* no other way of explaining existence, yet acknowledgement of existential fragmentation is the necessary precondition to Eucharistic intimacy: 'The simplicity of the Sacrament absolved him from the complexities of the Word' (ERS, 68). Thomas believes in the Incarnation, but he also believes in 'Other incarnations, of course,/ consonant with the environment/ he finds himself in' (C, 33), those slow yet piercing 'illumination[s] of the self' (ERS, 103) which make religious enlightenment possible. The birth

of Christ is also the beginning of thought; to quote Balthasar, one who bears witness to Christ, ‘feels himself breaking out of his own private world’.<sup>167</sup> Solipsism leads to idolatry and, in the *Christian* eschaton, idolatry is inseparable from atheism:

So the emphasis on the other  
 proved to them he blasphemed.  
 This stripling, this Nazarene  
 nobody the mirror  
 of God! They hurled their scorn’s  
 stones and the cracks accentuated  
 the sky’s age. There was scant time.  
 He withdrew into the wilderness  
 of the spirit. The true fast  
 was abstention from language.

He returned hungry  
 yet offered his body  
 as bread to believers. (‘Incarnations’, ll. 24-36)

As these images fall into place, like the tumblers in a combination lock, we decipher a compressed statement of Thomas’s theological position. Such is the draw of the ‘God is a reflection of ourselves’ manner of thinking that Christ’s declaration of Himself as Godhead, ‘Before Abraham was, I am’ (John 8: 58)—which is a reiteration of the Tetragrammaton—is misinterpreted by the scribes and Pharisees as mere profanity: ‘this Nazarene/ nobody the

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<sup>167</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. A. V. Littledale (New York: Paulist P., 1967), 104.

mirror/ of God!’ The pattern of regarding divinity as ontologically ‘transcendent’ (or ‘absent’) is so well established that the Incarnation is violently repudiated: ‘Then took they up stones to cast at him: but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by’ (John 8: 59). Agape, however, *cannot* be repudiated, and the celebration of the Eucharist, as Saunders Lewis wrote, is the literal ‘embodiment’ of Christic love: ‘There your Ecclesiastic sacrifice/ On the chalice of Jesus will be appreciated,/The unity of the mediation of Christ above— in heaven/ And here beneath the sky above.’<sup>168</sup>

Pertinently, the Gospel narrative to which Thomas refers in ll. 28-9 of ‘Incarnations’ commences with the scribes and Pharisees bringing the adulterous woman to Christ. This narrative, we remember, was also used in ‘The Reason’ (*MHT*, 27) and ‘Covenanters’ (*LP*, 170-4), and it appears again in ‘Symbols’ (*NTF*, 38). In this latter poem, Thomas admits a recurring fascination with the mysterious sentence Christ traces in the dust:

Always in my dream  
 he kneels there silently  
 writing upon the ground  
 what I can’t read— signs  
 and diagrams; and his accusers  
 have withdrawn [...]

Yet he consented  
 to be hung up on one  
 of these same symbols [...]

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<sup>168</sup> ‘Ode To His Grace The Archbishop of Cardiff’ (1946).

Commenting on this poem, Wynn Thomas writes, ‘Silence is Christ’s invincible defence against the assaults from the “old-fashioned” artillery of language, trained “to inflict on him woe.” So, too, is his crucifixion, as it baffles even the poem’s attempt to translate it into humanly comprehensible terms [...] Thomas writes poems that are self-confessedly doomed to be swallowed up by silence as instantly as Christ’s cipher was erased by sand’.<sup>169</sup> This may be true, but it is also important to realise that Christ, as was previously stated, is very probably alluding to Jeremiah 17: 13 and, if that is the case, then His silence in the eighth chapter of John’s Gospel is wordlessly loquacious. He does not speak but his silent condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees expresses everything. His silence shows us truth in the same way that the Crucifixion shows us His divinity. The Passion is not a ‘sign’ or ‘cipher’ but an unequivocal and graphic statement: ‘For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks search after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness’ (1 Corinthians, 1: 22-3). The terse conjunction at the heart of Paul’s statement is charged with theological optimism—the Cross is a ‘symbol’ of agape because the one who hangs on the Cross *is* agape. The faithless Jews and the rationalistic Greeks, like us, do not ‘believe/ in the ability of the heart/ to migrate’ (‘Bird Watching’, *NTF*, 52). Unwilling simply to accept Christ’s divinity, we either disbelieve the truth of His messianic mission, or supplant the Incarnation with scientific reductionism:

A child came  
and what I thought in his hand

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<sup>169</sup> M. Wynn Thomas, ‘“The Fantastic Side of God”: R. S. Thomas and Jorge Luis Borge’, in *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature*, vol. 60, no. 2 (Winter 2008), 184. Strangely, Wynn Thomas does not mention ‘A Species’ (*NTF*, 43) which employs the same image: ‘There came a day when the one/ without name and whose signature// is in cypher willed them to go back/ to their first home, destitute but wiser’. This poem combines the trope of the ‘unnameable God’ with the trope of man’s evolving religious consciousness. It may also be seen as a companion piece to ‘The Island’ (*H*, 20), a poem in which man refuses to allow his religious sentience to develop: ‘All this I will do,// Said God, and watch the bitterness in their eyes/ Grow, and their lips suppurate with/ Their prayers.’

was the key to the kingdom  
 turned into a retort  
 and test-tube, and his caliper eyes  
 were being stretched for measuring  
 the widening gap between love and money. ('Negative', *NTF*, 50)

You have made God small,  
 setting him astride  
 a pipette or a retort  
 studying the bubbles,  
 absorbed in an experiment  
 that will come to nothing. ('Raptor', *NTF*, 52)

These images seem to deflate John Pikoulis's argument that, 'Whether totalizing systems like metabolism and machines prise open an ambiguity that was latent in Thomas's metaphysical quest or whether they introduce ambiguities to it is a moot point'.<sup>170</sup> Notwithstanding Pikoulis's imputation that Thomas is attempting to elucidate a 'metaphysics' of God, the above lines clearly demonstrate the profound *fatuity* of 'the reductionist solution' ('Bleak 'Liturgies', *MHT*, 59). The metaphors of testing and categorization recall Thomas's earlier dismissal of the bishop requesting 'an analysis/ of the bread and wine' in *Experimenting with an Amen* ('Revision', *EA*, 69), and his twin appeals, within the same volume, to '*disprove* certainties' ('Countering', *EA*, 33) and seek 'an *inner* perspective' ('This One', *EA*, 58). Our thinking must be continually challenged, not passively accepted, for only the rigorous extirpation of juvenile, intellectual presuppositions will generate truth; all too often, 'We are graduates of the cartoon'

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<sup>170</sup> "'The Curious Stars': R. S. Thomas and the Scientific Revolution", 92.



(‘R. I. P, 1588-1998’, *MHT*, 37). In both ‘Negative’ and ‘Raptor’, the target is not so much ‘the power of science’<sup>171</sup> or speculative theologies which bid to replace ‘mystical experience of the divine with an attempt at its scientific measurement’,<sup>172</sup> but the sort of thinking which refuses to think about *itself*.

‘Man is the original of his idol’.<sup>173</sup> Feuerbach’s succinct phrase shows how we mistake symptoms for causes: to conceive of God as ‘absent’ says nothing about divinity and everything about human consciousness. Christ comes in place of the idols, and the caesura between the idols and Christ is inhabited by our awareness of the idol’s demolition:

The more God has counted as a discrete person, the less faithful one has been to him. Men are far more attached to their mental representations than they are to their most beloved beloved; that is why they sacrifice themselves for the state, the church, and also for God— so long as he remains *their own* production, *their idea* [...] they almost always wrangle with him: even the most devout of men gave vent, indeed, to the bitter exclamation: “My God, why hast thou forsaken me!”<sup>174</sup>

Given his infamous ‘death of God’ assertion, it is perhaps ironic that Nietzsche should see deeper than many dedicated theologians. Our ‘mental representations’ of divinity falsify the human-divine relationship. Christ’s tormented exclamation shows the *completion* of the eschatological narrative yet we, because our understanding of the narrative is distorted by ontologically-premised ‘ideas’, metamorphose the exclamation into a statement of despair:

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<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 93

<sup>172</sup> Christopher Morgan, *R. S. Thomas: Identity, Environment, and Deity*, 118.

<sup>173</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, in *Gesammelte Werke*. Cited in *God Without Being*, 30.

<sup>174</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human All Too Human*, II. Emphasis in original. Cited in *The Idol and Distance*, 65-6.

I built a cathedral—  
 to whom? Decorated it with the stone  
 population, the dumb mouths, the eyes blinded  
 by distance. ('Requiem', *LP*, 211)

'The eyes blinded/ by distance'— these lines could easily be used to articulate a précis of Thomas's religious verse. To bolster the point via quotation from an important passage in *The Idol and Distance*:

between God and man, incommensurability alone makes intimacy possible, because withdrawal alone defines the Father, just as the paternal withdrawal alone saves for man the sumptuous liberty of a Son [...] that which makes "God" available either to qualify or disqualify him offers only an idol of the spectator and is confused with the spectator in a fantasmatic identity. Distance as di-stance therefore means: duality alone allows recognition, communion progresses with the separation wherein gazes are exchanged.<sup>175</sup>

'Exchanges' between man and God are rendered possible by the Crucifixion, and we can only perceive the truth of the Crucifixion through an 'iconic' understanding of the Christ: 'But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image [*eikona*] from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord' (II Corinthians, 3: 18).

'The Mass of Christ' (*NTF*, 56) is another forceful denunciation of 'idolatry' and thus, *mutatis mutandis*, is a text which also emphasizes Christic 'iconicity'. Here again, irony is the organisational determinant. The text is structured around four seemingly despairing and

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<sup>175</sup> *The Idol and Distance*, 198.

unresolvable questions (ll. 6-8; 12-14; 14-17; 25-6) but the poem's *title* delivers an answer to them and, more importantly, suggests how they can in fact be eliminated altogether. 'Mass', from *missa*, denotes both 'mission' and 'dismissal'. This latter noun signifies the 'dismissal' at the service's conclusion, and so also signifies the instruction to carry Christ's 'mission' beyond the parameters of liturgical worship. Within the context of the poem, however, 'Mass' appears punningly ironic. The text's 'anchoring' questions are not authentic theological enquiries at all, but are tantamount to a narcissistic 'dismissal' of Christic love. The reference to Daniel chapter three in ll. 8-12 releases the text's predominant theme. Nebuchadnezzar's presumption in fashioning an idol causes his insanity and condemns him to live as an animal: 'the beasts' Christ, incarnate/ as an animal and not/ as a human being'. Idolatry produces blasphemy whereas 'iconicity' delivers redemption. Peace of mind can only be achieved through 'interminable/ alertness' (ll. 21-2) to the distortive influence of the ontological/ anthropomorphic compulsion: 'We live [...] innocent of a love/ that has anthropomorphised *its* creation' (ll. 30-1). In two important ways, the concluding lines adeptly reverse the trope of 'man fashioning God': God makes us in His 'image and likeness' and bequeaths us divinity by 'fashioning' ('anthropomorphising') Himself into the person of Christ. Thus, by regarding Christic love as that which is cognate with the Father, we, to quote Paul again, 'are changed into the same image'.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Cf. McGill, who seems oblivious to the poem's irony—possibly because he ignores the crucial reference to Daniel—and who uses an eco-critical paradigm to interpret the concluding lines: 'This is not the plaint of an animal rights activist, but of a man who understood and appreciated the wholeness of creation, who recognized that the truly innocent sufferers of the fallen nature of man have been the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, the fish of the deep [...] We have estranged ourselves from God by denying the unity of creation. The price of that denial is the ravaging of the world around us— and the diminution of our moral natures'. *Poets' Meeting: George Herbert, R. S. Thomas, and the Argument with God*, 179. As the key to this poem is clearly its *title*, McGill's essentially secular reading cannot be sustained. If Thomas were simply writing about man's responsibility to the created universe, then how do we account for the title's unambiguous reference to Eucharistic celebration? The Mass is defined by the sacrament of the Eucharist and the poem demonstrates that 'communion' with God—in all senses of the term—is possible *if* we are prepared to 'think' God non-idolatrously.

In 'Neither' (*NTF*, 58) also, irony becomes less a poetic tactic and more an entire theological perspective. The poem begins with a witty repudiation of the anthropomorphic instinct:

Not a person, neither  
 less than, since we are so,  
 personal.

God is not a person but the Incarnation establishes that He *is* a 'person' and also proves that we are very 'personal' to Him. However, since *we* are people, we cannot conceive of divinity in anything other than 'personal' terms. The opening lines simultaneously challenge and recalibrate our thinking. Thomas, perhaps alluding to the legend of St. Patrick and the shamrock, implies that Trinitarianism necessitates perspectival transformation; as 'Play' (*NTF*, 86) disdainfully pronounces, 'Belief in the Trinity/ for *most* of humanity/ suggests a nonentity'. 'Neither' continues by further attacking man's myopic conception of divinity:

Impassible  
 yet darkening your countenance  
 once for a long moment  
 as you looked at yourself  
 on a hill-top in Judea.

In another rejection of the 'Deus Absconditus' paradigm, Thomas stresses what he had previously described as 'the fallacy/ of the impassible' (*C*, 36). What is most noticeable here, however, is that disconcerting perspectival shift: God gazes disconsolately at *Himself* on

Golgotha. This time, Christ's 'iconicity' is explored through the 'perspective' of the Father. God 'anthropomorphically' enters the world to suffer Crucifixion; therefore, man must instruct himself to 'see' Christ as both human *and* divine and not as some sort of deific 'reflection'. Our gaze must be tutored and our language, although it can never 'describe' God, may still yet 'pronounce' Him:

Had I

the right words, it is the poem  
 that would announce you to  
 an amazed audience; no longer  
 a linguistic wrestling but a signal  
 projected at you and returning quick  
 with the unpredictabilities at your centre.

The paradox both illuminates and instructs. The poem *has* 'announced' God for it has taught us that Christ, 'on a hill-top in Judea', *is* God and, if that is the case, then it must follow that language is capable of articulating divinity. If *prosopopoeia* is the trope most capable of articulating divinity in many of the earlier religious poems, then in this text *occupatio* performs an equivalent function. Thomas, simply by declaring that he *cannot* articulate divinity, is able to do just that.<sup>177</sup> The 'linguistic wrestling' with divinity's unutterable centre is a 'signal', or 'sign', that idolatry has been replaced with 'iconicity'; that is, with a new paradigm with which

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<sup>177</sup> I am grateful to Jason Walford Davies for bringing this to my attention. As rhetorical device, therefore, *occupatio* could be seen as comparable to the 'non-ontological' Pauline decree that God reveals Himself 'not as in my presence only, but now *much more* in my absence' (Philippians 2: 12). This does not mean that God is some sort of 'quasi-presence', but that God, *because* He is omnipresent, cannot be 'limited'. Cf. Derrida's audacious contention that the 'most consequent forms of declared atheism will have always testified to the most intense desire of God'. Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey, Jr., and Ian McLeod (Stanford: Stanford U., P., 1995), 36.

to *reveal*—which is not to be confused with ‘saying’—the *authentic* nature of the man-Christ-God relationship:

we might recall those figures in sacred history who received a call from God, insisted on some kind of sign, and were granted one. So it was with Gideon who said to the Angel of God who appeared to him under the oak of Ophrah: “show me a sign that it is you who speaks with me” (and he was shown one). So it was with Jacob who wrestled with God’s angel through the night until he received the name of Israel. So it was too with Moses and the burning bush; with Elijah and the “thin, small voice” [...] And so it was with Christ who, while refusing to convert stone to bread, nonetheless revealed himself as a son of God through acts of healing and love. Even after his death, the resurrected Messiah acknowledged the human need for “signs” of recognition— making himself known to Magdalene as “teacher” (*rabounai*), to Thomas as wounded, to Peter on Lake Tiberias as fisherman, to the disciples on the road to Emmaus as Eucharistic sharer of bread. The passage in Luke is telling here: “They *recognized* him in the breaking of the bread... their eyes opened and they *recognized* him.” And it is only on foot of this sign that they realized, retrospectively, that “their hearts had been burning inside them while he had spoken to them on the road, explaining the Scriptures” (Luke 24: 30-35). In other words, it is through a specific epiphany of broken bread that the Messiah appears and, at the same time, reveals to the disciples their own desire, the passion in their hearts for something still beyond them. It is through the

*identifiable* sign of sharing bread that the desire of God is made manifest—  
*shown* even if it cannot be *said*.<sup>178</sup>

In Thomas's theological lexicon, deific 'unpredictabilities' and 'silences' are to be expected. Since we are not divine, it is hardly surprising that God continually surprises *us*:

Where is  
 the ladder or that heavenly  
 traffic that electrified Jacob?

We wrestle with somebody,  
 something which withholds its name.

How is the anonymous  
 disposed? [...]

Why, then, of all possible  
 turnings do we take  
 this one rather than that,  
 when the only signs discernible  
 are what no one has erected?

Is it because, at the road's  
 ending, the one who is as a power

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<sup>178</sup> *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*, 74-5. Emphases in original. 'The Promise' (NTF, 59) reiterates Thomas's view that although God is beyond 'literal' verbalisation, He is still 'knowable': 'From nothing/ nothing comes. Behind everything—/ something, somebody? [...] Beyond/ the stars are more stars where love, perhaps,/ or intellect or the anonymous is busy'. By fastening the two commanding nouns 'love' and 'intellect' to the adjective 'anonymous', Thomas shows that the Tetragrammaton, although not a noun itself, is still able to generate 'denotative' significance.

in hiding is waiting to be christened? ('The Waiting', *NTF*, 64)

Comparable to the 'anti-anthropomorphic' images in 'Neither', these lines suggest the measured but persistent growth of religious consciousness. Desiring some sort of epiphanic 'expression' of God—the angels seen by Jacob—man is perplexed by God's supposed reticence. The concluding images, however, reverse the image of metaphysical 'grappling' in the poem's second stanza and posit instead the need to re-think our very *conception* of divinity. We must 're-christen' or 're-baptize' our religious terminology and thereby rejuvenate our religious intelligence. God is 'expressed' by the Tetragrammaton and the Tetragrammaton is a *statement* of 'anonymity'. We should not regard the Tetragrammaton as signifying an unapproachable, distant, or truculent 'being', but as God's 'articulation' of human-divine truths. Moreover, the verb 'christened' seems to denote the literal recognition of God *as* Christ. The 'anonymity' of the Father is given 'particularity' by the Son, but this can only be realised if we firstly dismantle the ontological compulsion. The definite article in the poem's title reinforces the sense of expectancy engendered by the accompanying verb. Even if one were to interpret the three previous poems entitled 'Waiting' (*F*, *BHN*, *WA*) as assertions of 'delay' or 'postponement', it is obvious that in this text the title is heavily indicative of *completion*. The period of 'waiting' is synonymous with self-examination, and self-examination, as has been argued, is the necessary prerequisite to religious understanding. The reduction of divinity to some sort of confrontational and brooding 'abstraction' has been superseded by the Incarnation.

As the volume concludes, the theme of intellectual recalibration is foregrounded in several poems:

the beak strikes the  
twelve sharp notes that are



neither midday nor midnight

on the skull's anvil

but links of a chain

that thought forges and thought

tries continually to break [...]

They have teeth,

too, smaller than rice

with which they gnaw

and gnaw, as the mind gnaws

at the truth [...]

A rodent

is a tireless reminder

to the mind worrying away

that the end of such performance

is to bring the house down. ('Bestiary', *NTF*, 68)

It was true

what the book said in answer

to the world's question as to where

at death does the soul go:

'There is no need under a pillarless

heaven for it to go anywhere'. ('The Morrow', *NTF*, 77)

this  
 is the descendant of David  
 who, with steel pebbles  
 taken from the mind's brook  
 has for ever laid  
 low the muscle-bound,  
 close-quarters club-  
 wielder whose aim is  
 to hold the intelligence in thrall. ('Portraits', *NTF*, 81)

In the shadow  
 of so vast a God I shiver, unable  
 to detect the child for the whiteness. ('Blind Noel', *NTF*, 84)

Is there a conspiracy  
 against sagacity?  
 Confound simplicity. ('Words', *NTF*, 85)

an attitude  
 from exactitude  
 can become a platitude. ('Play', *NTF*, 86)

God graven  
 erstwhile gives now  
 before mind's groping

after him among germs,  
galaxies. Gone, he still  
gazes upon us. Gracious. ('Anybody's Alphabet', *NTF*, 89).

All these images clearly refer to a *restructuring* of thought. When Thomas writes in his 'Autobiographical Essay' that 'it has come to me many times with a catch in the breath that I don't know who I am',<sup>179</sup> he is not implying that he lacks self-knowledge or even that his pursuit of selfhood, in Christopher Morgan's words, is characterised by 'a knowing and a not knowing'.<sup>180</sup> Rather, Thomas means that thought must recognize *itself* as incomplete and underdeveloped.<sup>181</sup> To quote Barbara Prys-Williams, one of the best writers on Thomas's autobiographical work,

Theorists now allow that good autobiography may as fully communicate the sense of a life as the events of a life and that "self-enacting, self-reflexive verbal structures" may be important means of communicating the feel of a life from inside in areas in which discursive prose might be inherently inadequate.<sup>182</sup>

Thomas's autobiographical texts, like the extracts from *No Truce with the Furies* quoted above, 'authorize' themselves as verbal stimuli. These texts show the *mechanisms* of mind in the same

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<sup>179</sup> R. S. Thomas, 'Autobiographical Essay', in *Miraculous Simplicity: Essays on R. S. Thomas*, ed. William V. Davis (Fayetteville: U. Arkansas P., 1993), 20. The essay was originally published in the *Contemporary Authors: Autobiographical Series*.

<sup>180</sup> Christopher Morgan, *R. S. Thomas: Identity, Environment, and Deity*, 22.

<sup>181</sup> Morgan's proposal of an 'antipathy between knowing and unknowing' in the 'Autobiographical Essay' piece seems to miss the target. If there was *genuine* antagonism between knowing self and divinity on the one hand and the nullification of such knowledge on the other, then it is difficult to see how thought could *ever* advance; thought would merely exist as a kind of ouroboros, purposelessly and perpetually champing on its own tail. *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>182</sup> Barbara Prys-Williams, "'A Consciousness in Quest of its Own Truth": Some Aspects of R. S. Thomas's *The Echoes Return Slow* as Autobiography', in *Welsh Writing in English 2* (1996), 98. Morgan quotes the same passage but seems to misconstrue Prys-Williams's argument. Prys-Williams does not mean that Thomas's autobiographical poems investigate 'often contradictory selves of the individual' (Morgan, 23) but that the poems dramatize or 'enact' the poet's movement *towards* resolution. They are not simply explorations but are powerful *catalysts* in themselves.

way that the icon unlocks authentic from counterfeit ways of ‘seeing’ and, in so doing, encourages the journey towards truth. ‘I fear theology/ is just an allergy/ of anthropology’ (‘Play’, *NTF*, 86). Despite the mischievous tone and apparently ‘throw-away’ texture of the thought, here too the images ‘double-back’ upon themselves to signify something deeper than the immediately noticeable. Theology may be no more than a ‘virus’ in the mind—if God does not exist then the only option is to study man himself—but ‘allergy’ is also indicative of ‘aversion to’, so the metaphor can also be interpreted as a statement of *revitalized* theology. If we wish to understand God’s relationship to creation, then we must firstly comprehend ourselves. To re-engineer the humanistic import of Pope’s aphorism, the proper study of mankind really *is* man, as it is only by understanding the self that we progress towards an understanding of divinity:

The xtremities of the Cross  
 so far xaggerated  
 as to become the kiss  
 of the xploiter, an xample  
 of how, when all things could  
 be xcellent, all are wrong. (‘Anybody’s Alphabet’, *NTF*, 92)

It is not God but *we* who ‘exaggerate’ that which is true. The Cross does not require embroidery or embellishment (‘presume not God to scan’) yet we persist in ‘refashioning’ the Christian message so that it will dovetail with *our* intellectual presuppositions:

An idol is nothing in the world [...] But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him. (1 Corinthians 8: 4-6).

The matter-of-factness of Paul's declaration shows the simplistic perfection of Golgotha. Everything *is* 'excellent' if only we would teach ourselves *how* to perceive and, for the Christian, perception is tutored and sharpened by the 'iconography' of the Cross. Let Rowan Williams, whose comment that 'Thomas's doctrine of Christ would be a fruitful subject for further investigation' provided the stimulus for this chapter,<sup>183</sup> have the concluding word:

God wills not to be separated from us, not to be shut out from any corner of our being. There is a poem by Rilke, 'The Angel', in which the poet warns us against inviting angels into the house, because they will turn the whole place upside down and seek out all the hidden corners and mould us into new shapes. It is something like this that we may sense in looking at this image [...] of invading love, love that does not recognise boundaries. For us, of course, this is a pretty shocking notion; we are rightly taught that love should not be invasive, should always respect boundaries. But this is a caveat for human relations. In human experience, intrusive or invasive love is an attempt to destroy something, the essential distance between person and person that makes human love a joyful and risky exploration of another's mysteriousness. Trying to annihilate the boundary is trying to get to the end of a process that is not meant to end, trying to consume another and absorb them [...] But God's love for us does not face that kind of boundary, since God is not in any way another individual in

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<sup>183</sup> See n. 1.

competition with us. God simply *is* present to every aspect of our being because he is its source and sustaining energy. Recognizing and welcoming that presence as unqualified love is a hard and frightening task, since we are all too easily inclined to treat it as if it were indeed the intrusion of another individual subject like ourselves. But we need to let ourselves hear the good news that Jesus again and again reinforces in the gospel— that God does not compete, that God’s love is without cause or condition, that God is gloriously different from all our assumptions about how human individuals live and negotiate together.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> *Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin*, 32-4.

## Afterword

### ‘Beyond Symbiosis’

This thesis has attempted to show that R. S. Thomas’s religious poetry is a great deal more complicated than it may at first appear. Taking as a starting point the assumption that Thomas, as a poet, is intrinsically interested in the relationships *between* language and thought, the thesis has argued that a ‘hermeneutical’ interpretation of the religious poetry affords at least one way of engaging it. This of course is by no means the final shape of an interpretation—every critical approach enacts its own restrictions, every preference is a farewell to other possibilities—but it does have the merit of indicating a possible pathway through the immense labyrinth of Thomas’s religious verse.

‘One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to look at its use and learn from that. But the difficulty is to remove the prejudice which stands in the way of doing this’.<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein’s insight provides a statement of methodology— if we wish to truly understand *anything*, then we must examine the foundations of our conceptual nomenclature. Like Wittgenstein, Thomas often seems concerned to remind us of obvious truths which we have been compelled to forget by unnecessarily byzantine theological and philosophical theories. The poet shows us that ‘God’ cannot be a proper name; that deific ‘silence’ is actually voluble; that apophasis and cataphasis originate from the same ‘idolatrous’ point of departure. In Thomas’s intellectual lexicon, the noun ‘religion’ must be put on trial— what, the poet repeatedly asks, does the term actually *signify*?

If one accepts that Thomas’s primary intention is to attack theological *unawareness*, then critical arguments that posit Thomas as a religious believer ‘against his better judgement’

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, section 340.

rapidly fall apart. Because we are conceptually muddled, Thomas argues, Christ lies undetected within the heart. The animus against the inner voice stems from a conviction that God is so far ‘above us’ that He cannot be understood, yet Thomas shows us that such an understanding of God is a straightforward consequence of human presumption. The poet demonstrates that the term ‘God’ cannot be docketed and categorized, tidily and conveniently slotted into one, enticingly all-embracing, theological system. In order to make any sense at all, theology must be persistently modified. As Paul van Buren writes: ‘Theology is that activity of men struck by the biblical story, in which they undertake to revise continually the ways in which they say how things are with their present circumstances, in the light of how they read that story’.<sup>2</sup> In a true theology, no amount of stagnant a priori theorising regarding deific ‘attributes’ will suffice. Philosophical arguments and cleverly-wrought syllogisms are inadmissible, for it is our very *use* of the term ‘God’ which forms the basis of our confusion. In Thomas’s religious verse, the terms ‘God’ and ‘religion’, far from being obligingly pellucid, suddenly become opaquely problematic. Thomas challenges calcified, theological rubrics; for Thomas, ‘heterodoxy’ *can* be orthodoxy, ‘doubt’ *can* be faith, ‘silence’ *can* be prayer. In this sense, it is mistaken to label Thomas as *either* ‘orthodox’ or ‘heterodox’, for ‘doctrinaire’ Christianity *is* questioning and doubt. Thomas, like all true poets, wishes to demoralise habit, intimidate routine, and break the hold of unreflective acquiescence. The religious poems *enact* themes of perceptual renewal and, in so doing, dramatize shifting, and *rejuvenated*, theological perspectives.

Thomas’s supposed religious ‘scepticism’, therefore, is actually a form of religious comprehension. He shows us that there is indeed a species of scepticism wholeheartedly hospitable to religion. For Thomas, scepticism does not acridly dissolve belief but reinforces and develops it. Thomas’s ‘scepticism’ is comfortably housed within doctrinaire Christianity, and his supposedly ‘anti-religious’ poems should really be viewed as part of a campaign against

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<sup>2</sup> ‘On Doing Theology’, in *The Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures*, vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1967/ 8). Thomas’s copy of this book is held at the R. S. Thomas Study Centre.



intellectual pride. The poems dramatize a shift from metaphysics to psychology and from ontology to hermeneutics. The God of the philosophers is supplanted by a scepticism that is essentially propaedeutic: scepticism does not diminish faith but is faith's mandatory counterpart. Thomas deserts metaphysics for psychology, because he is happier scrutinising *motives* than squabbling over ontological futilities. He tells us that we are plagued by doubts and that these doubts originate in our compulsion to diminish God to our own trivial dimensions. Thomas informs us that we avoid as well as miss truth and that we unwittingly connive at our own deception. Thomas's art dislocates us from *habitual* perspectives in order to enforce the case for intellectual reform.

Norman Malcolm once quoted Kierkegaard to Wittgenstein: 'How can it be that Christ does not exist, since I know that he has saved me?' Wittgenstein was apparently delighted with this and replied, 'You see! It isn't a question of proving anything!'<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein's response is extraordinarily revealing. Neoscholastic natural theology and aprioristic religious 'theories', do little more than plunge the religious thinker into deeper and deeper wells of theological bewilderment. The genius of Thomas is that he is able to write religious poetry which both dramatizes and *clarifies* the central axioms of Christian faith. As Kierkegaard contended, Christ does not have to be 'proved', but understanding *this* requires insight and imagination as much as intelligence. It is the symbiosis in Thomas's poetry of intellect and imagination—or, we could say, intellect and theological 'vision'—which makes him one of the great religious poets of the twentieth century. His verses both engage theological difficulties and, more importantly, suggest ways in which, through the power of the imagination, those difficulties may be overcome. Thomas's poems make the abstract concrete and the disconcerting explicable; his metaphors, symbols, and emblems, are more irrefutably cogent than libraries of syllogisms.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, cited in Fergus Kerr, "Work on Oneself": Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Psychology*, 48.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. this comment by Wittgenstein on the rationalism of neo-Scholastic apologetics: 'The Symbolism of Christianity is wonderful beyond words, but when people try to make a philosophical system out of it I find it

Thomas's final position, we can argue, is that a 'symbiotic' understanding of divinity forms the keystone of religious belief. The *via negativa* and the *via positiva* are simply different methods of verbalising the same *type* of religious thinking. Idolatry veils the iconicity of Christ but, once this is apprehended, God 'becomes' Christ in symbiotic union; the Exodic censure against speaking God's name is, in reality, a symbiosis of deific 'silence' and human speech. This is not to say, of course, that Thomas's religious poetry provides us with everything we require in order properly to 'think' the human-divine relationship; nevertheless, the poems do give us a rung on the ladder *towards* truth. It is in this sense, I think, that Thomas's religious poetry is profoundly cathartic. Once we realise that different 'symbioses' provide an opening for truth, we can then investigate and further *refine* those symbiotic associations. In this context, therefore, 'symbiosis' is interpreted as a metaphor for a type of theological reasoning, which, once its intellectual parameters have been established, should be utilized as a catalyst for *additional* theological explorations. Thus, Thomas's religious poems ultimately show us that to 'go beyond' the recognized boundaries of thought is the omega point *of* thought, for only then, the poet seems to suggest, will the reality of God become truly real.

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disgusting'. *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. Rush Rhees (Oxford: O. U. P., 1984), 86. In addition, when Wittgenstein commented that he could 'well imagine a religion in which there are no doctrinal propositions', he seemed to be visualising, as Fergus Kerr notes, 'something remarkably like the non-dogmatic Christianity which the Modernist [theologians] wanted'. *Theology after Wittgenstein*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: SPCK, 1997), 194.

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